THE FINAL MOMENT

A Maithili novel exploring human dignity, social conscience, and moral continuity.

ANTIM KSHAN

Original Maithili novel authored

by

<u>Jagdish Prasad Mandal</u>

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Translated into English

by

<u>Dr. Ram Ashish Singh</u>

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A Maithili novel of rural Mithila, agrarian struggle, and human dignity.

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated from the original Maithili

by

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An English Translation of the Maithili novel Antim Kshan
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The Final Moment, translated from the Maithili novel Antim Kshan, is a novel of rural Mithila in which death opens the deepest pages of life. The passing of Ramkisun is not treated as an isolated family tragedy; it becomes a mirror in which Kamalpur, its fields, caste relations, rituals, debts, struggles and changing political consciousness are seen together. Through Ramkisun's long companionship with Mangaldev, the narrative follows the rise of a new social vision: resistance to feudal dominance, questioning of hollow ritual, faith in labour, agricultural renewal, and the search for human dignity beyond caste and inherited fear. Set against the turbulent decades after Independence, the novel moves from famine, war, drought and agrarian hardship to pumps, improved seeds, collective action and ideological awakening. Mandalji's prose carries the cadence of village speech, philosophical reflection and social realism. The final moment of the body therefore becomes the continuing moment of society, memory and struggle. Rooted in Mithila, this novel shows how a life, even when it ends, can illuminate the path of many lives.

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Translator's Dedication

To the farmers, labouring hands and quiet fighters of rural Mithila, whose lives teach that dignity does not end with the body, and that a life lived for others continues to speak in society, memory and struggle.

Translator’s Preface

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The Final Moment, the English translation of Jagdish Prasad Mandal’s Maithili novel **Antim Kshan**, begins with death, but it does not end with death. At the visible level, the novel opens with the news of Ramkisun’s illness and, soon after, his passing away. Yet in Mandalji’s fictional world, death is never merely a physical event. It becomes a moment of remembrance, judgement, responsibility and social self-examination. The last breath of one man opens the larger life of a village, a family, a generation and a moral tradition.

The novel is rooted in **rural Mithila**, but it should not be read as a narrow regional narrative. Mithila, in this work, is not a decorative background. It is a living social field. Its fields, ponds, roads, courtyards, caste relations, rituals, debts, disputes, occupations, agricultural hopes and political memories all take part in the movement of the novel. Mandalji does not write about the village from outside. He writes from within its breath, its speech, its labour and its anxieties. This is why the village in **The Final Moment** appears not as a picturesque settlement, but as a complete moral and historical world.

At the centre of this world stand **Ramkisun** and **Mangaldev**. Their relationship gives the novel its emotional depth and intellectual force. They are not friends in the ordinary sentimental sense alone. For nearly fifty years, they have shared the same line of thought and action. They have stood together in social struggles, faced court cases, gone to jail, challenged local injustice and tried to

awaken a new consciousness among ordinary people. Their companionship is therefore not merely personal; it is ideological, ethical and historical. When Ramkisun dies, Mangaldev does not lose only a companion. He loses a witness to his own life, a co-worker in struggle, and a man who shared the burden of thought.

The title **The Final Moment** is deeply suggestive. In common understanding, the final moment means the moment immediately before death. Mandalji enlarges this meaning. The final moment is also the moment in which a life becomes accountable before society. It is the moment in which the living must decide whether they have understood the dead. Ramkisun's last wish that the rites after his death should be performed according to Mangaldev's view places the whole narrative in a difficult moral situation. His body lies before the family and the village, but the true question is not the body alone. The true question is this: how should a life lived in opposition to hollow ritual and social exploitation be honoured after death?

Here the novel reaches one of its most serious concerns. The question of **shraddha-karma** is not treated as a minor matter of custom. Mandalji turns it into a social and philosophical question. He understands that rituals survive because they are connected with fear, memory, family honour, social pressure and inherited habit. At the same time, he recognises that ritual may become a form of exploitation, especially when poor and middle-class families are forced to spend beyond their capacity in the name of the dead. The novel asks quietly but firmly: should the dignity of a dead person be measured by ritual expenditure, or by fidelity to his values? Should the living family be burdened in order to satisfy social expectation? These questions give **The Final Moment** a moral urgency that goes beyond one village and one death.

Mandalji's narrative method is distinctive. He does not move mechanically from one incident to another. One event opens into

another memory; one question leads towards another layer of history. The news of Ramkisun's death brings forward memories of famine, migration, medical change, agrarian hardship, political movements, caste relations and village transformation. A conversation about a doctor can take the narrative back to the Bengal famine and the movement against British rule. A dead body in a courtyard can bring into view the long struggle against ritualism and social domination. This is not loose digression. It is Mandalji's way of showing that no human event stands alone. Every incident has roots, relations and consequences.

In this sense, the novel may be read as a work of **ethical realism**. Its realism lies not only in external detail, though the detail is rich and exact. We see the **darbajja**, the **lota**, the **gamchha**, the hand-pump, the fields, the motorbike, the doctor's place, the courtyard, the rain, the sisters arriving, and the village receiving news from ear to ear. But these details are not ornamental. They carry lived history. Mandalji's realism is ethical because it asks what human beings owe to one another within these material conditions. It is social because the individual is never seen outside family, caste, labour, ideology and collective memory. It is philosophical because even ordinary acts such as washing, eating, hoeing, carrying a body or deciding a rite become questions about the meaning of life.

The postmodern significance of the novel lies in its refusal to accept a single centre of truth. **The Final Moment** does not place all wisdom in the city, the state, the priest, the official archive or the heroic individual. It gives space to many forms of knowledge: agricultural knowledge, bodily experience, women's memory, caste experience, village mediation, ideological speech, folk understanding, legal struggle and family obligation. The novel does not allow one grand narrative to silence the others. It shows life as a field of many voices, many memories and many unfinished arguments. In this grounded sense, Mandalji's fiction has a

postmodern depth without becoming artificial or fashionable.

This is one of his important contributions to modern Indian fiction. The village is often romanticised as purity, or dismissed as backwardness. Mandalji accepts neither view. **Kamalpur** is not an idyll, nor is it a ruin. It is living, divided, intelligent, wounded, hopeful and self-contradictory. It contains feudal residues and democratic aspirations, caste arrogance and anti-caste impulses, ritual pressure and rational questioning, poverty and dignity, old habits and new experiments. The village in this novel is not outside modernity. It is one of the places where modernity is tested, resisted, translated and remade.

Agrarian life occupies a central place in this vision. Agriculture is not simply an occupation in the novel; it is a way of thinking. Land, water, seed, labour, pumps, borewells, crop disease, drought, flood, government schemes and new methods of cultivation all shape the consciousness of the characters. Mandalji understands rural change from below. He is interested not only in policy, but in the farmer's mind when water reaches the field, when new seeds create hope, when a dispute over land or irrigation disturbs old relations, and when labour becomes a path towards self-respect. In his fiction, the field is not outside thought. The field itself thinks through the people who work upon it.

The political consciousness of the novel grows from this agrarian ground. Ramkisun's movement towards Communist thought is not presented as an abstract theory brought from outside. It emerges from the actual experience of inequality, feudal dominance, ritual pressure and the need for collective action. The novel remembers speeches, party work, court cases, jail experiences and social campaigns, but its deeper concern is the transformation of fear into courage. Mandalji does not simplify ideology. He knows that young men do not become perfect revolutionaries merely by accepting a new slogan. They remain surrounded by caste, family, poverty, hesitation and desire. Change moves through

time, through generations, through partial victories and painful compromises.

The treatment of caste is equally layered. Mandalji does not approach caste merely as a slogan. He shows it in marriage, feasts, village prestige, labour, education, daily judgement and social distance. At the same time, he shows cracks within the caste order. He shows the possibility of a moral life beyond caste, but he never presents that possibility as easy or complete. The movement towards **human dignity** is a struggle, not a declaration. This honesty gives the novel its strength.

One of the most moving aspects of **The Final Moment** is its treatment of the body. Ramkisun's body is ageing, diseased and finally dead, yet his life is never reduced to illness. He continues to work. He continues to think. He continues to remain responsible towards his family and society. His end comes after ordinary labour and ordinary food, after hoeing in the field and eating jackfruit. There is no melodramatic grandeur here. The pathos lies in the very ordinariness. Mandalji knows that rural lives often end without spectacle, but not without meaning. Ramkisun's body stops; his responsibility continues. His death compels the living to decide how memory should act.

The women in the novel, even when they appear within the structure of family life, carry important emotional and social force. Manesari's immediate response to Mangaldev's call, the daughter-in-law preparing tea, the sisters whose arrival must be awaited before cremation, Ramkisun's wife and daughters, the anxiety of marriage expenses and the vulnerability of widows and daughters all show that social decisions pass deeply through women's lives. The novel exposes the blindness of a society that may spend heavily on death while the living remain insecure. Mandalji's reformist vision is therefore not only ideological. It is domestic, financial and human.

As a translator, I have felt that a novel so rooted in Maithili speech cannot be carried into English by removing its local texture. Words such as **darbajja**, **lota**, **gamchha**, **panchaiti**, **kachahri**, **shraddha-karma**, **tola**, **bigha** and **dhur** are not merely local colour. They are units of a civilisation. To erase them would be to flatten the social geography of the novel. The effort in this translation has been to make the narrative accessible to English readers while allowing the cultural presence of Maithili to remain alive. English, here, should not domesticate Mithila into a neutral language. It should become a receiving language in which Maithili experience can speak with its own cadence.

That cadence matters. Mandalji's prose often moves like oral reflection. A character speaks, pauses, remembers, compares, argues, returns to the present issue and then moves again into another layer of society. Thought is not separated from conversation. Philosophy does not arrive in academic abstraction. It arises at the **darbajja**, in the courtyard, near the field, during a journey, beside a dead body, inside a village dispute. This gives the novel a democratic form of thinking. Wisdom is not the property of institutions alone. It circulates through farmers, activists, elders, women, relatives, workers and neighbours.

For readers outside Mithila, **The Final Moment** offers an opportunity to enter a literary landscape that deserves wider recognition. It reminds us that a serious novel need not always depend on metropolitan crisis, urban isolation or fashionable psychological fragmentation. A major novel may emerge from the moral density of a village. It may find its philosophical centre in the question of funeral expenditure. It may treat a farmer's life as a historical archive. It may show that the future of society is debated not only in parliaments and universities, but also in courtyards where ordinary people decide how to honour their dead.

The universality of this novel arises from its rootedness. It

does not become universal by leaving Mithila behind. It becomes universal by entering Mithila fully. The grief of losing a companion, the burden of fulfilling a last wish, the conflict between tradition and conscience, the pressure of society upon the individual, the dignity of labour, the fragility of the body, the hunger for justice and the fear of forgetting those who struggled before us: these are not regional matters. They belong to human life everywhere. Mandalji reaches them through the precise soil of Kamalpur.

At its deepest level, this novel is about continuity. The body ends, but work continues. A voice falls silent, but thought continues. A comrade dies, but the test of comradeship continues. A ritual is questioned, but the struggle against exploitation continues. A village changes, but its unresolved questions continue. The final moment is therefore not final in the ordinary sense. It is a threshold. It asks the living whether they will reduce the dead to ceremony, or carry forward the moral labour for which the dead lived.

Jagdish Prasad Mandal has given in **Antim Kshan** a novel of rare social conscience and quiet strength. I have tried, in **The Final Moment**, to carry that strength into English with care, humility and respect for the original Maithili world. The novel deserves to be read not only as a story of death, but as a story of life's responsibility. Its answer is patient, earthy and firm: life becomes meaningful when it is joined to others; thought becomes real when it enters labour; and dignity survives when memory becomes responsibility.

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At seven in the evening, Mangaldev got off the bus and had barely reached the **darbajja**, the front sitting-space and entrance of a Mithila house, when his nephew Sahdev said:

"Kaka, Ramkisun Kaka's condition has become very serious."

Mangaldev and Ramkisun were almost of the same age, with only two years between them. For nearly fifty years they had shared the same line of thought and action. Together they had been drawn into many lawsuits, together they had gone to jail many times, and more than once they had even taken up sticks and fought their opponents. Here, fighting does not mean private violence. It means that, on social questions, the two had stood on the same side and fought together.

Mangaldev was returning from Patna after five days. His body was worn out, and he had already crossed seventy. Even so, because of his lifelong habit of labour, he was not completely exhausted. Yet the farmers' movement programme in Patna had left him physically and mentally tired. For three days he had neither bathed nor eaten properly, and the strength of his body had certainly weakened a little. Still, like Krishna, his inner

strength burned bright, and because of that he remained calm in all circumstances. Hearing the news of Ramkisun from his nephew, Mangaldev called out to his wife:

"Bring a lota of water to the darbajja."

Manesari was, in any case, obedient to her husband. On top of that, she was hearing his voice after five days. She was not like those women who might say, "I am talking just now; I shall come after a while." Even at seventy, Manesari still had such obedience in her that whenever her husband asked for something, she measured the importance of her own work by the tone of his voice. At such moments, she became almost like a servant of servants.

As soon as her husband's voice reached her ears, Manesari left the lentils spread out in the winnowing tray exactly as they were. She stopped picking out the grit and stones, lifted a lota from the veranda and went straight to the hand-pump. She had just filled the water and reached the darbajja when Mangaldev said:

"By the time I wash my face and hands and drink some water, prepare tea and bring it."

The exchange at the darbajja between Manesari and Mangaldev was heard by their daughter-in-law Sudeshari, and she at once began preparing the tea.

Before drinking tea, Mangaldev changed the clothes he had been wearing. In the village, he was the kind of man who could move through the whole settlement in a lungi and gamchha. He had just put on the lungi and taken the gamchha over his body when Manesari arrived with the tea. Mangaldev had barely taken the first sip when Suvanshlal arrived. Suvanshlal was a young man of about thirty and had been in touch with Mangaldev for

ten or twelve years. Seeing him, Mangaldev said:

"Baua Suvansh, what is the state of the village? I have just returned from Patna, and Sahdev tells me that Ramkisun Kaka's condition is very bad. What has happened to him?"

Hearing Mangaldev's question, Suvanshlal replied:

"Kaka, there is little hope for Ramkisun Kaka. As far as the last news goes, he was alive then, but I have not been able to learn what his condition is now."

Just as the mind of a man dulled by fatigue becomes fresh after he drinks water mixed with salt and sugar, so too, after drinking water and tea, alertness returned to Mangaldev. He asked:

"Suvansh, is the motorbike in running condition?"

Suvanshlal said:

"Why? What urgent work has come up for the bike at this hour?"

Mangaldev replied:

"Come to Jhanjharpur. First I shall meet Ramkisun. After that, whatever has to be done will be done."

Just as Mangaldev was a man of firm words, Suvanshlal was a man of quick action. The moment Mangaldev spoke, Suvanshlal got ready and said:

"By the time you leave the darbajja and reach the road, I shall take out the bike and bring it there."

Seeing Suvanshlal's readiness, Mangaldev said:

"You must know where Ramkisun has been taken in Jhanjharpur, which doctor he is with."

Suvanshlal replied:

"Yes. It is not like earlier, when Prabhas Babu was

the only doctor. Now Jhanjharpur itself has doctors by the dozen."

Suvanshlal was young, and so he did not yet have the measured way of speaking that comes with age and experience. Instead of naming the doctor, he began speaking of doctors in general. Hearing this general talk, Mangaldev said:

"Why are you talking of Prabhas Babu? Even during his lifetime, his household and property had begun to fall apart."

Hearing Mangaldev say this about Prabhas Babu, Suvansh's curiosity grew. He asked:

"What do you mean, Kaka?"

Although Mangaldev was intent on going to Jhanjharpur, a strange conflict now arose in his mind. On one side, he had to see Ramkisun, who was lying on his deathbed. On the other, Suvansh's question stood alive before him: what medical facility had the people of this whole area gained from the arrival of Prabhas Babu? The moment Prabhas Babu came into his thoughts, Mangaldev's mind slipped a little away from Ramkisun, and the thought of Prabhas Babu came forward. He said:

"Baua Suvansh, this is a matter from around 1940. There was a terrible famine in Bengal. At that time, in our country, under Gandhi's leadership, a powerful movement had spread against British rule. Bengal was both a stronghold of British rule and a centre of trade."

Suvansh interrupted:

"Bengalis are, in any case, quick to take the lead. And when such a crisis came upon them, the movement must have spread even more fiercely."

Stopping Suvansh's line of thought, Mangaldev said:

"Such a famine came upon Bengal that it became difficult for Bengalis to live on their own land. That is why migration began."

Suvansh asked:

"What kind of famine was it?"

Mangaldev said:

"The Bengal you see today, developed in industrial terms, was not like that then. Only Kolkata city had industries; the rest of the region was agricultural. For three or four years there was a scarcity of water, and on top of that disease struck the crops so badly that there was hardly any yield. A terrible hunger spread. More than five lakh people died, and many more kept leaving Bengal."

Suvansh asked:

"Did Prabhas Babu also come to Jhanjharpur at that time?"

Mangaldev said:

"Yes. Jhanjharpur gave him shelter. While supporting his family, he also acquired enough property, fields, a house and so on. Along with that, he earned such prestige in this area that even children knew his name."

Suvansh said:

"Now everything has ended. His sons and nephews sold off the property, the fields and the house, and went back to Bengal."

Just then Chhedilal arrived and said:

"Mangaldev Bhaiya, a terrible blow has fallen. Ramkisun Bhaiya has died. A man has just come and told

us."

The moment Mangaldev heard the news from Chhedilal, the strength of his body escaped like air from a balloon. He sank down on the road with a thud. Tears began streaming from both his eyes. Within a short while, the news passed from ear to ear across the village: Ramkisun had died.

Seeing tears falling continuously from Mangaldev's eyes, Chhedilal said:

"Bhaiya, nothing will come of weeping and grieving. Who can trust this body? Who knows when it will remain conscious and when it will become lifeless?"

Mangaldev, of course, understood this himself: the body is perishable. But a relationship formed with someone in life does not leave the mind and thought untouched. Meanwhile, Suvansh brought the motorbike and stopped it on the road near Mangaldev. Seeing Chhedilal, he understood that some sad news had reached Mangaldev Kaka, and that was why he was so distressed. To settle the uneasiness in his own mind, Suvansh asked:

"Chhedi Bhai, what is the news of Ramkisun Kaka?"

Wiping the tears gathered in his eyes, Chhedilal said:

"Ramkisun Bhaiya has died."

Suvansh asked:

"How did you come to know that?"

Chhedilal replied:

"I am coming from Ramkisun Bhaiya's own place. There is crying and wailing in the courtyard."

In the air of a village, some news spreads which turns out to be absolutely true, even if some other news

may be completely false. Suvansh said:

“Kaka, nothing will come of crying here. I shall leave the bike in the courtyard, and then both of us will go to Ramkisun Kaka’s place. What we see with our own eyes will leave no room for falsehood.”

Mangaldev said:

“Suvansh, first find out this much: if Ramkisun has died, has the body arrived from Jhanjharpur, or is it still delayed?”

Suvansh said:

“We shall know that only after reaching there.”

As it happened, Mangaldev and Suvansh reached Ramkisun’s place, and at the same time Ramkisun’s body also arrived from Jhanjharpur on a tempo. They took the body down from the tempo and laid it at the darbajja. The tempo driver turned back and left. Seeing Mangaldev, Jeevanlal said:

“Mangal Bhaiya, we had taken Ramkisun Bhaiya to Choudhary ji, to the doctor. He was examining him when, in the middle of it, his life departed.”

Mangaldev asked:

“When did Ramkisun begin to feel unwell?”

Jeevanlal replied:

“In the daytime, around twelve, while eating, he had eaten some jackfruit bulbs. After that his stomach began to swell. As long as he could bear it, he did not tell anyone. But when his stomach swelled and tightened like a stretched umbrella and he began having difficulty in breathing, he called for me. The two of us had been hoeing together till eleven o’clock, so there was no reason for any such suspicion in my mind.”

Suvansh asked:

“What happened afterwards?”

Jeevanlal said:

“When I reached Bhaiya, I saw that he was writhing restlessly. I asked him, ‘Bhaiya, what is happening?’ He no longer had the strength to speak. With his hand, he gestured towards his stomach. Seeing that his speech had stopped, I called Bhauji, Ramkisun’s wife, and told her that we must take Bhaiya to the doctor.”

Hearing about the food Ramkisun had eaten during the day, Mangaldev’s mind at once grasped the matter. For twenty years, Ramkisun had already been suffering from an internal disease. He had been living with medicines, treatment and dietary restrictions. On top of that, he must have eaten too much of a heavy fruit like jackfruit, and this had led to the present condition. But now, what other remedy could there be? Mangaldev said:

“What was to happen has happened. What are you thinking of doing next?”

Jeevanlal replied:

“What is there to think about? The next rites will have to be performed.”

Hearing Jeevanlal’s words, Mangaldev’s fifty-year relationship with Ramkisun began to stir in his mind. So many things, so many works they had done together, suddenly came back to him. But the crying and wailing of the family members and the villagers pulled his mind away from the life gone by and fixed it on the body lying before him. Suddenly his heart trembled at the thought that in their society the custom had always been to cremate the body as soon as possible. But almost at once

his own mind told him that bodies were sometimes kept even for three or four days. Mangaldev said:

“Move ahead with whatever the next rite requires.”

Jeevanlal said:

“Bhaiya, all five sisters have been informed by mobile. Ramkisun had eight brothers and sisters altogether. We shall think of cremation only after they arrive.”

Jeevanlal’s view seemed right to Mangaldev. He had seen in the village that bodies were often kept for three or four days. Along with that, another thought arose in his mind: when the incident belongs to a family, should the family’s view not be given priority? Society, after all, is as deep as the sea; all kinds of conduct and custom continue within it. Mangaldev said:

“Jeevanlal, at the time of his last breath, in the final moment of Ramkisun’s life, when death itself stood near him, were you close by or away?”

Jeevanlal replied:

“I was close by, Bhaiya. Slowly, Bhaiya’s restlessness began to lessen, and it seemed as though clarity returned to his speech.”

Mangaldev asked:

“Did he say anything?”

Jeevanlal said:

“Yes.”

Mangaldev asked:

“What did he say?”

Jeevanlal replied:

“When his life was about to leave him, he said, ‘Tell

Mangaldev Bhai that he should look after the family.'"

Hearing from Jeevanlal that he was to look after Ramkisun's family, Mangaldev's mind began to wander towards Ramkisun's second wife and his five children. Ramkisun belonged to an ordinary family. He had the marriages of four daughters to manage, and in the present circumstances, even the marriage of a daughter in a middle-class family cost nearly ten lakh rupees. Of those four daughters, he had already married three; one, the fourth, still remained. The fifth child was a son, still studying in high school. Trying to lighten the bundle of thoughts weighing upon his mind, Mangaldev asked:

"Did Ramkisun say anything more, or was that all?"

Jeevanlal replied:

"The doctor sahib also said that his mind remained clear till then."

Hearing the doctor's view, Mangaldev's own mind said to him that a mind disciplined for fifty years would not become confused so quickly. Others might think or speak of Ramkisun in their own ways, but he himself had lived with him and watched him for fifty years. How many men of the village were capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with Ramkisun? Living within an ordinary family, Ramkisun had always stood firm on questions of suffering and hardship, not only for himself and his family, but for society as well. And today that man had come to an end. A new generation was being formed in such a way that it did not even know the names of its own ancestors; how then would it remember a man like Ramkisun? Suddenly, Mangaldev's heart began to melt like wax. He said:

"Jeevanlal, did Ramkisun say anything else?"

Jeevanlal replied:

“His last words were these: whatever rites are to be performed after death should be done according to Mangal Bhai’s view.”

The moment Mangaldev heard these words from Jeevanlal, it was as though his heart had been struck by a heavy blow. He remembered the day when Ramkisun had, for the first time, heard a speech against Brahminical ritualism from Bhogendraji, former Member of Parliament and a thinker of the Communist tradition. On that day, Ramkisun had taken a vow that as long as there was life in his body, he would oppose Brahminical ritualism. He would uproot from society the rituals performed after death and throw them out from their very roots. In the village of Kamalpur, Ramkisun, together with Mangaldev, had become a comrade and had joined hundreds of young men of the village to one ideology. Together, they had begun the effort to abolish the exploitative customs attached to shraddha-karma. There had been dozens of occasions when, after a death, hair-cutting, shraddha-karma and the feasting connected with them had been set aside. In the present time, however, many adjustments and compromises had taken place, and the ideology itself had passed through ebbs and shifts. In the intervening years, since the movement against shraddha rituals had begun in society, Ramkisun’s own parents too had died, and in their case he had rejected those rites. But the present atmosphere had become such that the very people who had once led the opposition to the rites were now becoming their supporters and leading them. In such a situation, what was to be done?

All at once, Mangaldev’s mind grew bewildered. Yet he said nothing. The reason for his silence was that the first task before them was to cremate Ramkisun, and that

had to be completed first. Besides, so far only one sister had arrived; the remaining four were still delayed. Darkness too was slowly increasing. It seemed possible that, because of the night, the sisters would arrive the next morning. They had also asked everyone to settle whatever urgent family work they had and then come. With the availability of vehicles, people did travel through the night as well.

As the last light of evening faded, a sooty darkness began to spread. Mangaldev said:

"Jeevanlal, I am going now. If you decide to cremate the body at night, send word to me. If the decision is for tomorrow, I shall come myself in the morning."

In truth, Jeevanlal too was torn between two positions on shraddha-karma. Among the three brothers, Jeevanlal was younger than Ramkisun, while Nanulal, the elder brother, had died earlier. Nanulal's two sons too were divided in the same way. On one side stood the group in society that opposed the impractical form of shraddha-karma; on the other side stood those who supported the rituals that had continued according to tradition until now. Ramkisun had, to this day, remained a supporter of his own ideology, his opposition to shraddha-karma. But in the joint family, though they belonged to one brotherly line, the families had become separate. There had been disputes at times, and it would not be true to say that there had never been bitterness. Even so, deep within, Mangaldev felt a certain satisfaction. It was as when Krishna had told Arjuna: "O Arjuna, you stand to gain either way, as the saying goes, laddus in both hands. If you die on the battlefield, you will attain the death of a hero; and if you do not die, that is, if you win,

you will attain heaven."

The formal rules of shraddha-karma would begin only after ten days. Until then, for nine days, there would be only the work of the cremation ground, and that had to come first. Whether the dead body was consigned to fire, buried under the earth, or thrown into some stream or watercourse and allowed to drift away, this was, after all, the final boundary of life. That much still remained alive in society: until the body was disposed of, society would remain of one mind and complete the work. On the third day, after the cremation and after the ash-gathering, the formal observances would begin. From the cutting of hair to the funeral feast, shraddha-karma would bring division and contention, and quarrels and reconciliations would certainly follow. Be that as it may, for now the first task was to cremate Ramkisun's body, and that itself was also a test for Mangaldev. His test was this: just as Ramkisun had become his comrade in trust, so he too had to remain with him until the final moment. For a human being, life means remaining true to one's companion from beginning to end; that was the test before him now.

As it happened, rain fell during the night, around supper time. The rain was not heavy, but it could not be called light either. Some children had eaten early and fallen asleep, so they did not even know when it had rained. But those who had been waiting to eat with their parents remained delayed, because though the rainfall itself was not much, it continued for quite some time.

At Ramkisun's house, no fire had touched the hearth; the dead body lay in the courtyard. Of the four

sisters who had still been delayed, three arrived during the rain itself, but the fourth remained delayed. Meanwhile, a dense question had risen in Mangaldev's mind. The question was this: on social issues, even within the collective that had stood against the hundreds of bonds and restraints in society, separate groups had begun to form. On some issues, a few people had broken away from the organised group and stood in opposition, while the larger body of the organisation had also remained in place.

Lying on his bedding, Mangaldev thought that such things had happened many times in life. Sometimes, people outside the bereaved family who helped in cremating a body would, immediately after the cremation, shave their heads, bathe, and begin to consider themselves pure and clean. There was a reason behind that too. If someone went to cremate a body and the next morning, or the next day, had to cross the village boundary for work outside, it would not be good for him to abandon his work and remain entangled in the matter of bathing and hair-cutting. Besides, under the influence of cinema actors, people had begun to value their hair in their own way; they were not always willing to cut it. Be that as it may, another thought rose in Mangaldev's mind like a dense cloud. Ramkisun had taken social issues as the central purpose of his life, and by doing so he had certainly struck, in some measure, at the rotten forms of feudal society. Who knew, then, whether society would not now rise all at once like a diseased body surrounded and seized by many illnesses, with each illness suddenly lifting its head and revealing its own qualities and defects? If that happened, the dead body would be dishonoured. Of course, questions of honour and dishonour exist in

thought only as long as consciousness remains in the body; a body itself is not that. Therefore, perhaps there was no real question of honour and dishonour. After all, one sees that some bodies are simply thrown away, while some are duly cremated. Suddenly it occurred to Mangaldev: why not, before the body was lifted in the morning, form a unanimous view among the whole family and move the work forward? Then there would be no possibility of obstruction in the middle, and the way would remain clear for the rites to follow.

Before sunrise, Mangaldev informed those in society who shared his view and then himself reached Ramkisun's place. Fortune favoured him here as well. Along with meeting all five of Ramkisun's sisters, he also found that they knew the views Ramkisun had held while alive. Ramkisun used to visit each of his sisters two or three times a year. In the course of conversation, he had often said that the money wasted by society after death, if spent on the living members of the family, could make life more liveable for them. All of them knew this.

Things turned out well. Ramkisun's cremation rites were completed peacefully and without obstruction. ❑

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In the Mithila region, Kamalpur is not only an old village; it is also a well-regarded one. A well-regarded village, in this sense, means a village whose soil is not barren or rough, but fertile. Its underground water too does not lie buried deep in the lower layers of the earth. As people say, the underworld has seven levels: Atal, Bital, Sutal, Taratal, Rasatal, Mahatal and Patal. In Kamalpur, water lies close to the upper layer of the soil. Therefore, just as a borewell for irrigating the fields can be made without great difficulty, hand-pumps for drinking water, ponds and wells too can be made with ease. Since the fields and open lands are level, cultivation in Kamalpur is also steady and dependable. When the means of livelihood are balanced, life too begins to acquire a certain balance. That evenness, that order, is the mark of a well-regarded village. On this basis, Kamalpur falls among the respected villages of Mithila.

Of course, every person has his own way of thinking, his own vision and viewpoint. From these different viewpoints, people see the same thing in different forms and meanings. That is why there are other reasons too for calling a village respected. Some believe that a village in which people of so-called high castes live in larger

numbers is a respected village. Some believe that a village with more educated people is respected. Others think that a village with more prosperous and wealthy people is respected. But in plain terms, this much must be said: a village, in its geographical form, means its boundaries on all four sides, its houses and courtyards, its roads, ponds and wells, fields, open lands, orchards and groves. When these are plentiful and good, that is a village; and the qualities present in that village are its real prestige.

Whatever may be the case elsewhere belongs to those places. Here the discussion is of Kamalpur, and so the question is: what is distinctive about Kamalpur's prestige?

In a society divided among dozens of castes, Kamalpur is a village where those who provide the necessities of life are all present. Just as farmers have fields, there are also all kinds of workers connected with agricultural life. There are barbers to cut hair, washermen to wash clothes, carpenters to make sickles, hoes, door-frames and doors, and members of the Dom community to make articles of bamboo. There are potters too, who make earthen objects. Alongside this, just as educated people are found among all castes, prosperous people too are present in every caste. Since it is a farming village, some agricultural occupations are, of course, associated with particular castes. But these occupations are not confined to them alone. For instance, some castes are regarded as those who rear cows and buffaloes, but that does not mean that people of other castes do not rear them. They do. Similarly, fishing and fish-rearing are associated with certain castes, yet others too rear fish in their ponds, small tanks, pits, water-hollows and low-lying wet places. Agriculture is the same. People of all castes

are connected with farming, and therefore everyone engages in agricultural work. Even among them, on the basis of produce, the Koiris and Kujras too are called cultivators.

The greatest quality of the village is this: it is a village of many castes, and among them there are dozens of castes that are almost equal in number. This keeps quarrels and disputes relatively low, and most conflicts are settled through **panchaiti**, local mediation. One may ask: why should disputes arise at all? But disputes will continue to arise as long as boundary ridges and field-lines remain around plots and property. Sometimes rain will wash away the ridges; sometimes floodwater will sweep them aside. Other problems of the same kind also remain. Yet just as the village is regarded as respected, it also has intellectual standing. That is why several political parties and several religious sects exist here.

In this respect, Kamalpur differs from many other villages. It is not a village with only one political party or one religious sect. Just as there are all kinds of political parties, there are all kinds of religious sects too. I do not mean to say that, just as religious sects speak of Advaita, Dvaita, Dvaitadvaita and Vishishtadvaita, political parties speak in the same way of women, Dalits and Mahadalits, creating a condition like a strained plough-yoke in which no one knows when the beam or the rope will snap. Yet something of that condition is certainly there. The followers of religious sects show the path of liberation for human life, and the people of political parties also claim to do the same. But the sectarian people do not ask this: if all members of a family truly desire the welfare of the family, why does quarrelling arise among brothers? In the same way, political people say that the essential elements of life

should be held collectively, so that the cart of life may move forward in trust.

I said that society has become like a strained plough-yoke. What I mean is this: the village is one, but the followers of the Kabir Panth have a stream of thought and a way of conduct quite different from those of the Ramaut people. Similarly, the wealthy are running with all their energy after wealth, after private property, while the majority of people also desire proper food and proper means for living. From this, everyone can see what form sociality has taken within society. Be that as it may, why should the people of Kamalpur be concerned with that?

Ramkisun was born in 1949 into a family whose economic base lay in the cultivation of grain and betel leaf, and that too on the basis of a particular caste occupation. Just as a vegetable cultivator knows the field suited to vegetables, a betel-leaf cultivator knows the field suited to betel. Hiralal was such a knower. From his ancestors he had received land sufficient to run the family. By land sufficient to run the family, one means land on which the labour of family members could be used and whose income was enough to sustain the family according to the conditions of the time.

Hiralal’s life depended mainly on betel cultivation, though he also had ten **kathas** of land in which he grew grain. The country had only recently become independent. The British rulers had been driven out, and because of this some political awareness had awakened in society. Yet society had already taken on a feudal form and continued to move according to that pattern. On one side were people without homestead, without clothing, without grain, crying out in distress. On the other side,

performances by courtesans took place then, and they take place even now. That too is village society.

The village of Kamalpur was not under the direct rule of the Darbhanga Raj, but under a zamindar family connected with that royal family. In that sense, it was a village under one landlord. Land auctions took place every year. This was an old disease of society: fragmented plots, small scattered pieces of land, were brought together, placed under auction and sold from village to village. In this way, new landlords kept increasing. By the time of Independence, in 1947, four landlords had entered Kamalpur. They collected revenue from the village and also cultivated land. The four landlords built four **kachahris**, estate offices, at four different places. Each had his own fields and threshing grounds, arranged separately in strips and sections. Each had also created for himself all the means of upper-class life.

Unlike many other villages of the Mithila region, Kamalpur had its own customs and its own social ways. The main reason was that, in many villages, outside landlords came from other districts and other states and established their ownership. That did not happen in Kamalpur. Just as the village passed from the Darbhanga Raj into the hands of zamindars, and then from those hands into the hands of other landlords, all of them belonged to the same district-region and the same administrative world. The four landlords of Kamalpur were local. Because of this, there remained a certain uniformity in speech, farming, festivals and marriage customs. This did not happen in many other villages. Outside landlords brought with them the language, speech and customs of their own native places, and because of that many kinds of practices still remain in

society.

It was Kamalpur’s good fortune that British rule did not fall directly upon its society. This does not mean, however, that the British had not extended their reach into the rural areas. They had. In Motipur, the village next to Kamalpur, a **neel kothi** (indigo factory) had been set up, and indigo was being cultivated over hundreds of **bighas** of land. It is another matter that long before the country became independent, during the early phase of the freedom movement, the people of Kamalpur had beaten and driven away the indigo planter. Later, with the invention of new dyes, indigo cultivation itself suffered a blow.

In 1935, at the Lucknow session of the freedom movement, a resolution was also passed against the zamindari of kings, rulers and landlords. Because of this, the collection of revenue by rulers and landlords was affected, and their rule also began to loosen.

Natural conditions too helped make Kamalpur a well-regarded village. How could the villages of Mithila, settled amid dozens of streams and watercourses, remain untouched by such influence? Destructive rivers like the Kosi and the Kamala are there. They have washed away the soil of hundreds of villages and turned them into sandy stretches like Rajasthan, and they continue to do so year after year. Villages that once lay laden with fruits and flowers like Janak’s garden are now such that people spend the fierce summer sun sitting in the shade of castor trees. Be that as it may, why should the people of Kamalpur be concerned with other villages? Their concern is with their own orchards and gardens.

Kamalpur’s good fortune was that four **kos** to the

west the Kamala dances, and four **kos** to the east the Kosi flows, while Kamalpur remains safe in between. Through it flows only one stream, Supen or Supurna, which has been flowing since ancient times. It neither hisses like a water-snake to cut into the village and destroy it, nor is it venomous like a dhaman, refusing to become a stream even once a year. In Bhadon it does become such a current that even experienced boatmen tremble while crossing it. But can one therefore say that Supen is a life-destroying stream? No, one cannot. From Ashadh to Asin, it changes into a four-month stream. Then, gathering its flow, it becomes like a pond for four months; the current stops, people irrigate their fields from it, and for the remaining four months it becomes grazing land for cows and buffaloes. In this way, just as it is the revered stream of the village, Kamalpur too is the revered village of the stream.

One may ask: in what sense is it revered? For those who do not have a place of their own to burn or bury their dead, Supurna is indeed a revered stream. Wherever one wishes, in the dry season, one may burn or bury the dead body in the bed of the stream. If water remains in the bed, one may burn it on the bank. If it is Bhadon and the current is flowing, one may consign the body to the stream. This work Supen, or Supurna, has performed not only for one village society but for many village societies; and not merely today, but from the beginning, ever since the stream came into being.

Because Kamalpur is a densely settled village, along with food, water too is one of the principal necessities of life. In fact, water is more important than grain, for a person can remain alive for even a month without grain, but cannot complete thirty days without water. More

necessary than water, of course, is air. But air fills the space from earth to sky, and so people do not feel its want in the same way. The village is divided into twenty-one **tolas**. A **tola** means a settlement cluster. The lay of the land in a village varies; indeed, even within a single village the high and low stretches differ from one another. In dry weather, one may live almost anywhere, but during the rains that is not possible.

Among the twenty-one tolas into which the settlement is divided, there are some in which only people of one caste live, and others in which people of several castes reside together, drinking water from the same well and bathing in the same pond. Therefore, one cannot say that there were no ponds or wells in the village where restrictions existed, from drinking water to bathing. Yet the effect of such restrictions on society was not quite what the mind might imagine, because the ponds and wells where restrictions existed belonged to single-caste settlements. Thus the influence was not so much of religion as of economic power. Even within one caste, it was not that the fire and water of those who were economically weak, that is, poor, were never rejected. That too did happen.

Along with this, Kamalpur gained another achievement: the bringing of private water bodies under public authority. In the early period after the country's Independence, the transfer of water bodies to public control was also an important gain. In other words, private water bodies, especially ponds, were transformed into common ones.

Hiralal was a betel-leaf cultivator who, with his own hands and labour, grew twenty **aantar** of betel in sixteen

korbas. He had no brothers to share the work with him, and in a middle-level family such a difficult condition had always meant that divisions took place among brothers. Hiralal's family slowly grew larger, while he alone remained the earning hand. In terms of caste, the caste of betel cultivators, Hiralal's wife Sugiya was different from many other women. Women in other families did not understand the method of **bareb**, betel cultivation, but Sugiya knew all its skills. She could even irrigate the betel plants with a **loit**.

A **loit** is a large earthen water-vessel, but the shape of its mouth is different from that of an ordinary pot. It cannot simply be called a common earthen pot used for storing water. A usual pot has a wide mouth, whereas a loit has a small one. The reason for making the mouth of a loit small is this: it is lifted on the shoulder, the palm of the left hand is fitted over its mouth, the water falls downward in a stream across the palm, and then, with the palm of the right hand, that stream is checked and turned into a spray through the spread fingers, so that irrigation reaches from the face of the betel plant down to its root. Irrigation too has its own conveniences and difficulties; that is why betel cultivation is called heavy cultivation. Wherever betel is grown, the bareb is enclosed on all four sides with thick fencing and covered above with dense shade.

In Kamalpur, in 1947, there was only a lower primary school. It had one teacher, who taught the children of the village. The school ran in both sessions, in the morning and again in the afternoon. Five years later, Ramkisun's father, Hiralal, had Ramkisun's name entered in the school. Schools had not then become markets of thousands and lakhs, as they are now. There was no fixed

amount as admission fee. Parents, of their own will, would give one rupee to the teacher at the time of admission.

The school was in the middle of the village, and so even small children could come there on their own. After four years, Ramkisun passed from the village school and entered the middle school at Simra. He studied there from the fourth to the seventh class. Four years later, after passing middle school, he enrolled in the high school at Tamuria. In his tola, the tola of his caste, Ramkisun was the fourth student to enter high school.

Flood, drought and cold waves have not come to the Mithila region only today; they have been coming from old times. People of the village were also connected with the four kachahris through their produce and their occupations. Some were connected as sharecroppers, others through their own work. Hiralal too became connected with one kachahri, the landlord's estate office. Throughout the year, he supplied the landlord with the betel required there, and in return five kathas of land were given to him for betel cultivation. In the landlord's section, the kachahri circle, some people of society had begun going in and out of the landlord's place and would assist him in work, considering it their own concern.

In 1962, there was a severe cold wave in the Mithila region. It was such a cold wave that, just as farming life was struck, vultures, tulsi plants and cobras too disappeared from the area. Kamalpur had a settlement of about a hundred families engaged in betel cultivation, and the betel of all those families rotted away. Only the betel of all twenty aantar in Hiralal's bareb survived. In those days, betel was not used in society on the scale on which it is used now, nor did betel from Calcutta arrive

from outside. Even the number of people who chewed betel in society was smaller. In social and ritual activities such as shraddha, marriage and worship, betel was distributed collectively, and that created some special demand.

With the destruction of betel cultivation elsewhere, Hiralal's fortunes rose. What happened was that the demand for betel could be met only by betel itself. In the previous year, the betel that had sold for one rupee or one and a half rupees per dholi now, because of scarcity, rose to sixty or sixty-five rupees per dholi. Hiralal earned good money from betel. He already had his connection with the kachahri circle, the circle of one landlord, and he used the money to buy land. With that money he bought nearly two and a half bighas of land.

In 1966, Ramkisun passed the matriculation examination from Tamuria High School in the second division. By then, Janata College had opened at Jhanjharpur, and students from Kamalpur would walk to and from the college and study there. But neither Ramkisun himself nor his guardians thought of sending him further, and so he could not move ahead in education. Before him, three boys from his tola, his caste tola, had gone forward. Of them, two got stuck at the matriculation stage, while one, after passing matriculation, went to the ITI college at Ghoghardiha and received training as a carpenter. Among those who failed in matriculation too, one later took training in carpentry. In those days society had not yet become job-oriented. People made their livelihood from their fields and lands, or from some small occupation. Besides, Hiralal had seen the income of 1962 with his own eyes, and so an immense faith in cultivation, especially in the bareb, remained in his

mind as the basis of livelihood. The addition of two and a half bighas of land had already awakened further hope in life. Later too, the price of betel rose. The reason for this rise was that betel cultivation in the surrounding area had been destroyed. Betel cultivation is not a one-season crop that will take shape in four months. It takes two years for betel cultivation to acquire its form, and after that it remains alive for many years.

In 1967, Ramkisun became Mangaldev's companion and, by filling in the membership form of the Communist Party, became a member. Even before that, the Communist Party had existed in Kamalpur, but it had been caught in an arson case and had faded away. It had stood up in society as a small unit of the party, but after being trapped in the arson case, it was ruined. Five persons were sentenced by the district court to ten years each. What that incident was need not be taken up here.

After becoming a member of the Communist Party, Ramkisun began to take part honestly in party programmes. Alongside that, he spent his time in his farming life. In 1967, Bhogendraji became a Member of Parliament from the party. Ramkisun was deeply influenced by Bhogendraji's speeches. How the party's ideology should move through society along with organisation in the village, this idea, though not fully formed, had taken root in Ramkisun's mind. He began to give a great deal of time to building an organisation of young men.

As it happened, in 1969 the idea of holding Durga Puja arose in the village, in Kamalpur. By then Ramkisun had become known in the village as a responsible worker of the party. A meeting of the village community was held

in the courtyard of the middle school. In that meeting, a unanimous view emerged that Durga Puja should be held in the school courtyard. Since there was no temple that year, the image would be installed in the school itself. In several villages of the area, Durga Puja was held in schools. People from almost all tolas were present in the meeting.

The month of Asin had already begun. The time of worship was near. At that time, Lakhnaur block had not yet been formed; Kamalpur was part of Madhepur block. The block had twenty-eight large panchayats, stretching from the Kosi in the east to beyond the Kamala in the west. The pramukh of Madhepur block was himself from Kamalpur.

The pramukh's house was in the northern tola of Kamalpur. His own view was that the Puja should be held on the northern embankment of the big pond, a place that would fall towards one side of the village and would also be near his own house. On the morning after the village meeting, the pramukh took ritual earth from the northern embankment. There was a strong reaction in the village. From the point of view of social order, society was still bound within a feudal arrangement. A few young men of the village, among them Ramkisun too, took betel leaf and areca nut in hand as a pledge that the Puja would be held in the courtyard of the middle school. In terms of thought, society became entangled: which was better, this or that? Should the Puja be held in the school courtyard, or on the northern embankment of the big pond?

Among the young men, Hiralal declared his own position and said:

"Even if the whole of society goes to that side, to the

place where Pramukhji has taken earth, Hiralal will still take earth here. Beside the school, on the southern embankment of the pond, there is one katha of embankment land. Three mango trees stand there. On the middle tree among them, I shall bring a four-anna paper picture, nail it there, and worship alone for as long as I remain alive.”

Thus, in the very first year, in 1969, Durga Puja began at two places in the same village. As people say, even a spinning wheel gained in plunder counts as profit, and something like that did happen. What happened was this: except for a few Durga temples in the area, animal sacrifice took place at almost all places; in Kamalpur, it did not. Of course, supporters of many kinds of religious sects lived in the village, and they had opposed animal sacrifice and continued to oppose it. On this basis, in the Durga Puja that began at the school, there was opposition to sacrifice, and a unanimous view against sacrifice emerged. Once sacrifice was opposed at one place, individual opinion became trapped. As a result, the pramukh too was compelled to oppose animal sacrifice. This is the force of the people.

In the village, only a few counted persons stood openly and firmly by the decision of the school meeting; the rest of society began to turn and twist. As a result, those who gave one-sided support to the chosen place were few, and most people became two-sided. Even so, some tension of ideas did arise in society.

The run of the Puja began, and that too for the first time. Most people in the village, whether two or four people sitting together, or whole tolas gathering at one place, began discussing the Puja as a social task. Since it

was a large Puja, a ten-day Durga Puja, the expense too would be considerable; therefore public support was necessary. From collecting contributions to preparing the image and making the place fit for worship, everything became necessary.

One thing certainly happened: as talk of the Puja spread, discussion of the place also began. What was the side and what was the opposition, what idea was supported and what was opposed, that did not remain the real issue. The issue became this: in a worship like Durga Puja, which continues day and night, children, men and women would all go to take part; therefore the Puja at the middle school would be far safer than the one at the big pond. Along with this, a public invitation had already gone through society that everyone should certainly come to receive the prasad. After worship carried on day and night, prasad is distributed. Even now, society carries the belief that if even an enemy invites one to a yajna, one must go. Quarrels or ill feeling may exist between people, but why should gods and goddesses be divided because of that?

After the image began to be made, people started going to the Durga place. At the site on the northern embankment of the big pond, people went after thinking and deciding; but at the school site, people wandered in without needing to think. Whatever else happened, people began to gather there as a group. At the school Durga place, there was indeed a shortage of workers, for work had to be done from collecting contributions to arranging the place. In terms of thought, the school courtyard Puja received more supporters than the Puja on the northern embankment of the big pond. There was another reason for this. A few particular families came to

dominate that site; this did not happen at the school site.

From the very beginning, it became clear that gods and goddesses are not divided among anyone; they belong to all. Therefore, in the evening people would go to light the lamp, and in the morning they would go to take flowers for worship. The place had to be smeared and swept every day. Children, in any case, always have an eagerness to do good work, to take up something new each day in work and thought. When they found a new place, work and thought both began to rise like a flood.

The suppressed ideas of some people awakened in the form of action. Small trades such as tea and betel, jhilli, kachari and other things began to emerge. Dukhni Ma was the only one who thought of opening a shop for popped grain prepared as offering. Similarly, Bhuliya and Chulhiya, each on her own, had her own thought. One of them decided to open a shop for ramdana popped grain. The other thought that during the Puja many people would also observe fasts. Those who had the means would break their fast with ripe bananas and cow's milk, but those who did not have those things would regard sweet potatoes as fruit. Boiled sweet potato was already accepted in society as food for fasting. So boiled sweet potatoes and suthni could also be sold. She decided to take up that trade.

In a village of twenty-one tolas, Mangaldev and Ramkisun could not find even ten such men who were ready to give their time and work wholeheartedly for the Puja. Some people continued to keep their distance. Yet it cannot be said that everyone remained asleep. When a group of five or seven people went to some tola to collect contributions, a few men of that tola would join them and

help in the collection. Another good quality also appeared: lovers of the Puja, both men and women, did come to the place in considerable numbers. Is the importance of a dharamshala greater than that of the place itself, the place of worship? Certainly not. Therefore people sat in the courtyard of the place. Where there are wealthy people, dharamshalas are built in a grand, fashionable manner; where wealth is absent, one hopes for the shade of trees.

Until then, until 1969, the society of Kamalpur had neither awakened politically nor developed the strength to carry out arrangements in an organised manner. According to the thought that had prevailed so far, lying was considered a sin. But how many people in society do not lie? Some are helpless, some are compelled. Be that as it may, lying was no longer understood simply as a bad thought; it had come to be seen as clever speech. Thus the very form of lying had changed. In society, falsehood had spread its empire so widely that, like religion itself, it had taken possession of the veins of life, every field of living. Therefore, truth and falsehood could not be properly recognised in society, not even between individuals. Be that as it may, why should the people of Kamalpur be concerned with that? Their concern is with their own village and their own society.

Even so, to separate truth from falsehood is not merely difficult; it is extremely difficult. Today's truth becomes tomorrow's falsehood, and the truth of the day after tomorrow may already have become today's falsehood. Nor is this confined to the human tongue alone. It is so in other areas of the world too, such as streams and watercourses, fields and open lands, seas and mountains.

In Kamalpur, with the installation of the kalash for Durga Puja, both softness and heat entered the atmosphere. This was natural, for from the installation of the kalash to Panchami, the Puja does not yet acquire its full scale; therefore softness remains, and, since the work is new, heat too arises. But from the sixth day, the day of Belnauti, the process of worship increases. As the process grows, fresh enthusiasm comes into the activity.

On Panchami, a rumour spread through the whole village that an elephant would come for Belnauti at the Durga place on the northern embankment of the big pond. Those who belonged to the school-site line of thought, the workers there, began to wonder: is worship performed by human beings or by elephants and horses? If someone wishes, he may hold a feast of Bombay mangoes grown by his own hands; if someone else wishes, he may also hold a feast of meat and fish. Who has any binding restriction in that? Bhagwati, Durga Bhagwati, has already decided her own worship: "I shall remain at both places. I shall remain with the saintly people who offer a sweet feast just as I shall remain with those who offer a goat." Desire is one's own; so is one's petition.

The second evening had passed, the night of Panchami. Mangaldev and Ramkisun sat together and began to think how the elephant was coming. Was it hired, or was it being given as support? Everything is available on hire. But then they learnt that it belonged to a mukhiya, a panchayat head. The moment Mangaldev heard the mukhiya's name, something struck sharply in his mind. The reason was this: until now both Mangaldev and Ramkisun had understood that the Puja was being held within the society of Kamalpur and therefore

belonged to that society. But in what form was participation from another society entering it? Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, this is a question of the village. And the village has now entered such a run of ideas that it is difficult to understand outside matters. So it will be better to remain silent on the question of the elephant."

Ramkisun was young, and on top of that, he had the backing of his father and a few people from his tola. He was therefore more excited than Mangaldev. He said:

"In the battlefield, even if it is one's father who stands face to face, one must face him."

The two had not yet reached any definite decision when Radheshyam came and said:

"Tomorrow a camp for old-age pension will be held in the village."

Ramkisun asked:

"Where will the camp be held?"

Radheshyam said:

"At the Durga place on the embankment of the big pond."

Ramkisun asked:

"Who all will come?"

Radheshyam replied:

"The BDO sahib will come with the full staff of the block, so that pensions can be approved on the spot."

Ramkisun said:

"What have we to do with old-age pension? Our turn will come only after forty years. It is the old men and women of today who will say how much fruit one gets at

the age of sixty. Will it be enough even for tea and betel, or not?”

On the day of Belnauti, the sixth day, activity began in the village from early morning. On one side was the movement for Belnauti; on the other, the movement for the old-age pension camp. A strange situation arose among the people of society. On one side stood the question of a constitutional right; on the other, the Belnauti of Bhagwati’s shrine. The outlooks of the two Puja committees were different. The Durga Puja committee on the northern embankment of the big pond wanted the greatest possible display of its power, so that dominance in society would remain. The Durga Puja committee at the school wanted to connect the largest possible number of people in society with the strength of society through the form of worship. Therefore, between the two committees, their styles of working became different.

The Puja on the embankment of the big pond received strong support from the administrative machinery, the political machinery, and the prosperous people of the area. From the very beginning, from the day the ritual earth was taken for the image, an attempt was also made to give it a caste colour. But that attempt backfired. There were several reasons for this, but two became particularly important.

The first was the claim that the Puja at the big pond belonged to the higher castes, while the Puja at the school belonged to the lower castes. That was not the reality. What had actually happened was that the so-called higher castes lived in two tolas of the village. One of these tolas supported the Puja at the school, while the people of the

other supported the second site.

The outline of higher-caste society that had existed until then had itself drawn a line of division within it. Some families regarded themselves as belonging to superior lineage within the caste and considered the others lower. As a result, all did not sit and eat together at one place, nor did marriage and festival relations move uniformly among them. Among the families regarded as lower in lineage, there were educated people too. At that time, several of them were Sanskrit-educated pandits. Naturally, they found this unequal treatment painful, but in the face of social power they could not do much. Similarly, there were people from politically active families, families counted as lower within the caste. Here, political involvement means connection with the fighting forces of the freedom struggle. They too had raised several questions in the sphere of eating and social mixing. In other words, among those considered lower, there were some families with whom full commensality did not exist, while with some others it did, though even there distinctions remained.

Within society, within caste society, the difference that had existed from the beginning had been somewhat levelled by ideological agitation. By agitation is meant ideological struggle. Some of it had been levelled, and some had not, just as in uneven fields some patches are irrigated by pump or borewell water and some remain unirrigated. Something similar had taken place in society. Members of the higher caste ate chura-dahi at the homes of those considered lower, while members of the lower group ate rice and dal at the homes of those considered higher. In Kamalpur, the Gandhiji connected with the Congress Kisan Party, whose earlier name was Bachnu

Mishra, had become Gandhiji because of his honesty in distributing relief during the earthquake of 1934. He had given ideological leadership. Because of this, a certain food-sharing practice had developed in society. Even so, some distance still remained. That distance lay in the fact that a uniform practice of eating rice and dal together had not developed; relations had stopped at chura-dahi and puri-sabzi.

The soldier who had driven away British rule during the freedom struggle, that Gandhiji, now began doing his own politics. By his politics is meant that he made the Puja site the main issue. The inequality that had arisen in society over the choice of site became his instrument, and in 1969 he once again created the kind of influence he had created in 1934. In his life, he had become a four-anna member of the Kisan Sabha only once, yet at one stroke he turned himself into such a peasant leader that, like Mahatma Gandhi, he received severe blows in his final days. Of course, unlike Gandhiji, he was not shot, but he died from the injury of those blows.

This should not be understood to mean that the problem of high and low existed only among the higher castes and not among the lower castes. That would not be true; it existed there too. And this was a village like Kamalpur, where Durga Puja had now arrived. Disputes over eating and drinking began among other castes as well, and they continue even now. Be that as it may, the people of Kamalpur will understand it in their own way.

There was another reason why the strength of the school Durga site increased. The village of Bishnupur lies right next to Kamalpur. In that village, among the so-called higher castes, there was a man of lower lineage

who had become a scholar of Sanskrit literature. But society gave him no recognition. Because of this, he left the village and went to Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. There he earned well and also gained a good reputation. He educated his children properly, and members of his family later became administrative officers in the Government of Uttar Pradesh.

In the final phase of life, after sixty years had passed, the soil and water of the Mithila region, the soil and water of his village, struck so strongly within Panditji's mind that he left everything in Kanpur and returned to the village. But would the society that had never cared for him until then not reject him in old age? It was bound to say, "When there was strength in your body, you spent it outside; and now, at the time of death, you have come back to the village to feed society a shraddha feast?"

The Durga Puja at the school site in Kamalpur received full support from Panditji of Bishnupur. His support lay in this: he began to share the ideas of the shastras and puranas with the people of both villages, Kamalpur and Bishnupur. Just as he saw that the people of society had been suppressed, he felt his own suppressed condition too. Through Panditji, the school Durga Puja received such support from Bishnupur that, though the physical distance between the two villages remained the same, the distance of thought between them was levelled, and the separation lessened. Day and night, evening and morning, seemed almost to disappear; the two villages became like neighbouring tolas. This is how things happen: distance in society is reduced by closeness in thought. That is exactly what happened between Kamalpur and Bishnupur.

Until then, among the higher castes, there had been no marriage relations between Kamalpur and Bishnupur. Now they began. Of course, the atmosphere of the present day has itself changed, and with vehicles and transport, distance has become still smaller.

After Bhagwati's image had been installed, the Puja began to acquire density. Until then, up to Shashthi, the prescribed form of worship remained limited, though even within that it kept increasing. From Saptami, the fair too began. Since Durga Puja had started in Kamalpur for the first time, those who worked outside the village also returned home with their families. Everyone in society invited his relatives and kin for the Puja. Besides, when a Puja is held in an area, the people of the surrounding area acquire at least this much right: if not with money, then with body and mind they should help their neighbours. To follow dharma is itself the direction of dharma.

A clear difference appeared between the fairs at the two places in Kamalpur. Of course, the devotees folded their hands and worshipped Bhagwati at both places. But among devotees too there are devotees whose interest lies less in worship and more in drawing the flavour of the fair.

The Puja at the school site had begun with the full support of society, the village; therefore, there was greater sociality there. The committee, the school Durga Mela Committee, neither invited outside traders and shopkeepers nor told them not to come. In other words, it neither stopped anyone nor urged anyone. According to the power that had awakened within society, the young men of the village themselves decided to stage a play for entertainment and made arrangements for it. At the

Durga site on the big pond, on the other hand, several kinds of income came in, and so several kinds of entertainment were arranged. There was no problem of expense there, while the Puja at the school site certainly faced financial shortage. Brother, when Durga Puja is the prescribed worship of power, society too must see how many forms of power it itself worships within society. Whatever happened or happens, take it as destiny.

At the site on the northern embankment of the big pond, traders from the markets of the surrounding area were called. With the increase in shops and stalls, the form and colour of the fair naturally grew. Whatever else happened, this much certainly happened: whoever came from outside to see the Puja visited both places and had darshan of Bhagwati at both sites.

Let the matter be made clear here. When one says the Durga site on the northern embankment, it means that the school site too was on the embankment of the same pond, the big pond, but on its southern side. Even today, the number of lotus flowers that bloom in that pond would not be matched by the ponds of a single neighbouring village; indeed, not even by the ponds of the whole area taken together. That is why the village is called Kamalpur.

The circumstances of the first year's Puja were such that a skilful image-maker somehow heard of it and reached the village. After discussion, he began making the image. By chance, he made such a beautiful idol that everyone who saw it said that thanks should be given to the maker who had created such a fine image.

Even if a tightly packed fair did not take shape at that site, so many viewers from the surrounding area

came to the village that for all three days, from Saptami to Dashami, the whole village kept resounding with the voices of visitors. In the meantime, it also happened that a few antisocial incidents took place at the Durga site on the northern embankment of the big pond, whereas no such incident occurred at the southern site. In any case, since the middle school stood in the heart of the village, the roads remained so filled with visitors from the four-sided village area, with children from all twenty-one tolas of Kamalpur, with alert elders, men and women, that no wrong element found the courage to do anything wrong.

Something else happened in between, on the boundary where truth and falsehood meet. A few liars, who wanted to provoke a quarrel between the supporters of the two sites, ended up being exposed as liars before ten people for no reason at all. Well, if even this much was gained from the worship of Bhagwati, it was no small gain.

People in society became so entangled in various kinds of work and various kinds of thought that they were pained by their own pain. Yet, arranging their own pain within themselves, they began to think of how to manage properly the arrival of the visitors who had come from other village societies to see the Durga Puja. In this way, they bore the burden of thousands upon thousands of visitors and completed the Puja without anxiety.

The Puja was completed, but ideological differences had awakened in society so sharply that, here and there, abuse and quarrelling began, and even beating and fighting took place. Just as, when floodwater comes, the papaya plants in orchards and groves begin to dry up at once, so after the immersion of Durga Puja, those who

spoke falsehood in the village began to dry up. Until then, in that society, there had been a lack of people who could understand truth and falsehood and, after understanding them, separate one from the other. But now such people began to spring up like a rainy-season nursery. The growth soon became dense. In it, creepers of akta-misia (inedible corn) spread through the fields of society, and trees like palm, coconut and bel also came up. In other words, such trees too were born which had no fear of crows, nor of dogs and monkeys. Such a tree was born in the field of Mangaldev's mind as well.

This is what happened. In Ratanpur, the village to the west of Kamalpur, there was a prosperous man named Singheshwar. For three generations, Singheshwar's ancestors had been the **mas-malik** of Kamalpur. A mas-malik means a zamindar who collects revenue in his own village, but if his own fields lie outside his estate, in another estate, he becomes the mas-malik of that village. When the income of even an ordinary family increases, the urge to spend also increases; where income is inherited, that urge naturally grows still more. Because of this, the mind too becomes swollen. A swollen mind means looking at others forever with a bad eye.

Mangaldev was a young man from a middle caste and a middle-level family, middle-level from the viewpoint of the village, not of the district, the region, the country or the world. He had spent four years in college and had entered the fifth year. In the meantime, Durga Puja had begun in the village. One day, Mangaldev came out of his house and was going southwards to work in his fields. Singheshwar was coming from the south towards the north with four or five men. Mangaldev had gone only a little ahead of his house when he saw Singheshwar. The

false words Singheshwar had spoken about him came to his mind, and he asked Singheshwar about them directly. Singheshwar knew all the tricks and turns of speech, and he practised them too. Society has people who speak at great length even today; it is not something new, it has always existed. Singheshwar replied in the pride of his status. Hearing the reply, Mangaldev showed his own standing, sprang forward, and caught Singheshwar by the neck. Be that as it may, what happened belonged to a day gone by.

After Durga Puja, another question arose in society. This concerned the collection of contributions. The accounts of the school Durga site were settled only a few days after the immersion. There were eight responsible workers of the committee who had already estimated that the collection would be small. So they had decided that if worship was performed properly and simply, no heavy load would fall upon their heads. In a tradition where, if there is no betel leaf, worship can be performed even with a betel stalk, why should one take a heavy burden upon the head? When the work can be kept simple, what need is there for a heavy bundle? In the end, the eight men each had to bear an extra load of thirty rupees, and the year's Puja came to a close.

On the other side, in the Puja committee of the Durga site on the northern embankment of the big pond, a dispute arose over the collection of contributions. The reason was that more than half the money had been kept by those who had collected it. In the meeting, it was decided that on a certain day everyone would submit his accounts.

Dates kept being fixed one after another, but

neither was a meeting held nor were the accounts cleared. One inner reason for the failure to settle the accounts was that most of the committee members themselves faced the same charge. Even though the committee meeting did not take place, this much did happen: face to face, they continued accusing one another, and through that the deeds of all became known in society. In their hearts, everyone accepted that whoever eats in the name of Bhagwati will not prosper.

Within society, among the villagers of Kamalpur, two kinds, or two colours, of thought were born. Among the supporters of the school Durga site, Durga Puja remained an object of worship. Among the supporters of the Durga site on the northern embankment, it began to take the form of trade, of business. That tendency continued to gather strength.

Today the Puja has completed fifty years. The form and colour of society have changed greatly. Of the workers of the first sitting, some have died, and some, having grown old, have handed over the burden to the new generation. In the present atmosphere, the Durga Puja at both places has become outwardly similar. Yet with the changed environment, with the growth of other kinds of worship and other public activities, the history of Durga Puja as it had existed until now has also undergone change. ❑

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In 1971, Mangaldev too had left college. By then, the condition of colleges had become such that examinations were being delayed by three and four years. Along with this, in some colleges open cheating in examinations had begun, while in others it had not. Because of this, students were holding sit-ins and demonstrations, demanding a uniform system across colleges.

An election was held in Pakistan. In it, Mujibur Rahman's party won a majority in East Pakistan, which is now known as Bangladesh. Until then, West Pakistan had ruled over East Pakistan. A fierce struggle began in East Pakistan. When war breaks out within one country, other countries too become involved in it in one way or another. India stood firmly with Mujibur Rahman. At that time, Indiraji was the Prime Minister. America had already aligned itself with Pakistan. By then, the Soviet Union had established itself on the world map as a powerful country, and it came out in favour of Bangladesh.

Until then, that is, until 1971, India still faced a shortage of grain, a shortage of food. The condition of the people of the country was not good either. On top of that, the war over Bangladesh, involving Pakistan, put further strain on the country. Be that as it may, Bangladesh was

born as a new country on the map of the world.

That year followed a strange course. From Phagun, from the day after Shivratri, rain began. It was not that it rained only once or twice; throughout the year, rain continued. This had a considerable effect on agriculture in India. On one side, there had already been a shortage of food for years; on the other, agriculture was further affected. A condition close to famine was created in the country. Jagjivan Babu was the Agriculture Minister. He fulfilled his responsibility with such skill that, in the matter of grain, the country became self-reliant. Before this, that is, before 1971, the country, especially Bihar, had gone through four years of drought from 1966 to 1969. This had made the condition of the Mithila region still worse.

The strengthening of relations between the Soviet Union and India led Indiraji to frame the Twenty-Point Programme. It was a programme directed towards a socialist path.

In the election of 1967, governments changed in several states of the country. The Congress Party, which until then had ruled almost unchallenged from the states to the Centre, faced a sharp turn. In Bihar too, the Congress government was defeated. Mahamaya Babu formed a new party named Jan Kranti and became Chief Minister. The parties outside the Congress, that is, the non-Congress parties, came together and formed the government in Bihar. Of course, legislators of all kinds of ideologies were included in the government, and so running it was difficult. Still, more than a hundred legislators belonged to the Socialist Party under Karpoori ji's leadership and to the Communist Party. Both these parties were part of the government. As a result,

programmes of public welfare were made. In the field of education, one important change certainly took place: English was pushed aside in the matriculation examination. In other words, until then a student passed only after passing in English, but that was no longer the case. Because of this, the matriculation results improved considerably.

At the time of the 1967 election, Madhubani district had not yet been formed. Therefore, there were two parliamentary constituencies known as East Madhubani and West Madhubani. Bhogendraji won from the western constituency, and Shivchandra Jhaji won from the eastern one. In the Bihar government, however, there was such pulling and tugging that the government lasted only eighteen months. Just as political awareness had surged among the people during the freedom movement, that is, in 1947, so too it surged during the election of 1967. Until then, from 1952 to 1962, the people had remained in a kind of dormant state during elections. Now awareness came, and the public came out on the roads.

The influence of the Communist Party also reached Kamalpur. Through the district party, several programmes of the Communist Party came down to the ground. Here one more thing must be noted. In the government's administrative arrangement, Madhubani district did not yet exist, but the Communist Party had already created its own district organisation there. The programmes included the Kosi canal, sharecropping, usury and many other issues. Bhogendraji was a Member of Parliament, and problems of the district began to be raised from the village level up to Parliament.

Along with Mangaldev, Ramkisun now began to

spend a great deal of time among the society and people of Kamalpur. Regular programmes and regular meetings, that is, party meetings, began to take place in Kamalpur. This brought awareness into society. The number of members increased. The Communist Party of Kamalpur began to show its presence in the form of processions. It took part in meetings in the village, in meetings at the anchal (circle) level and in district-level meetings, and it also began working to take party programmes into society.

Seeing the party's influence, the district leadership planned to run a party school in Kamalpur. A three-day programme was prepared. Janardan Choudhary from Bhagalpur, Chandraketu Sharma from Sitamarhi and Bhogendraji were scheduled to take part. The programme went well. Hundreds of young men from the district joined the programme in Kamalpur.

A public meeting of Bhogendraji was also arranged. Just as people attended the meeting in large numbers, Bhogendraji's speech too was full of concern for public welfare. Until then, casteist parties and religious parties had secured a special position for themselves by calling the Communist Party anti-religion and anti-caste. That position now received a severe blow.

In Kamalpur, two kinds of movements took shape at the same time. The first concerned sharecropping rights over land; the second concerned usury. The circumstances were such that there was neither a single zamindar living in the village nor a moneylending mahajan of that kind. Some landlords, seeing the direction of the wind of the time, had sold off their fields and open lands. Yet there was one landlord who still had

more than a hundred **bighas** of land. The total area of the village itself was only about five hundred bighas, and within that there had been five landlords.

Mangaldev and Ramkisun made great efforts in Kamalpur to persuade the actual sharecroppers of the land to file sharecropping cases, but that did not happen. The real sharecroppers either did not raise their heads because of the pressure and dominance of the landlords, or some of them opposed the village party on political grounds. Whatever the situation, under the leadership of Mangaldev and Ramkisun, members of the Communist Party became sharecroppers, and cases were filed in court.

Taking possession of the land became an even heavier problem, because the landlords were not themselves cultivating directly. In the village, the possibility arose of a clash between the real poor sharecroppers and the legal sharecroppers. The landlord would have gained full advantage from that. Meanwhile, another plan was made. Apart from the fields on which the sharecroppers were cultivating, there were other lands of the landlord: orchards and groves, the **kachahri**, and the land around it. A plan was made to occupy those lands. It was carried out as well.

The division in the village came clearly into view: the village was split into two parties. Of course, because of some other reasons, a third group also emerged. It did not become an organised group in the strict sense, but this much did happen: some people decided that they would go neither towards the landlord nor towards the sharecroppers. Yet even within that, scattering took place. Whether one was a sharecropper or someone who stood

by the landlord, in a court case there is always need not only of plaintiff and defendant, but also of third persons, such as witnesses, bail-givers and others. In some form or another, hardly any family remained outside; almost every family registered its presence on one side or the other.

Still, this much certainly happened: just as the legal sharecroppers, those who had filed sharecropping cases, did not receive the whole of the land, so too a portion of the landlord's land was distributed. By distributed, it is meant that those to whom land had been promised and who had been made companions in the case did receive land. Along with this, the landlord's land was settled at one-fourth to one-half of its proper value, and Kamalpur was freed from the landlord.

Amid the sharecropping struggle and the effort to occupy land, an arson case arose. In that case, the landlord himself remained somewhat on the side, but the people of the village were trapped very badly. They were trapped badly because people of many castes were implicated in the case. A case was lodged against twenty-nine persons. There was no real reason for the case. Overnight, fifteen or twenty thatch fences had been erected by Musahar families, referred to locally in the older language as Harijans. When the sharecroppers' group set out with the intention of taking possession, fire was set to those fences, and the Musahars were made the the visible face of the case. What happened was like the line: a new life will be gained after burning in the final pyre. At once, twenty-nine enthusiastic young men rose in society and moved forward in the direction of social reform.

Just as the influence of Communist thought

increased in the village, so, on the other side, because the panchayat pramukh was present, feudal thought too continued to rise. Yet this much certainly remained: in the village, not a single conflict took place in the name of religion or caste. This should not be taken to mean that the village had no different sects and no different castes. They existed then and they exist now, even if some modernity has entered them.

Among the people of the village, relations grew so strained that even those who lived close to one another, even those whose houses stood near each other, stopped speaking. Under the influence of ideology, even if conversation began, it turned into quarrel. Once speaking stopped, exchange, borrowing and mutual help were all affected, and society began to face difficulty in functioning. The earlier influence of the landlord also ended. Everyone knows the saying: once food has been eaten, water drunk and hands washed, what bond remains between yours and mine?

This affected the thought of society. What had earlier come from the mouths of one or two people now began to come from the mouths of most people in society: for so long there had been quarrels in society over land and landlords, but that was now gone; therefore whatever fault belonged to those days belonged to those days. Now everyone should offer his own cooperation as a unit of society. The idea was good, and so a certain uniformity formed in the thinking of the village. In one word, everyone expressed agreement that since they were one society, remaining united would bring welfare.

Mangaldev and Ramkisun too had already persuaded their own party, the Communist Party, to

agree that a settlement should take place. But the obstacle in the middle was this: there were thirteen cases that had been hanging in court for thirty years. Without resolving them, how could there be a settlement in society? Yes, if the cases on both sides had been equal, or only slightly more or less on one side, a settlement could have been made by weighing the burden of the cases. But that was not the situation in Kamalpur. Here, one party, the Communist Party, stood entirely as the accused side, and the other party stood entirely as the complainant side. Even so, everyone agreed that a settlement could be made on one condition. The condition was that since the dispute belonged to society, it would be best if society sat together and resolved it among itself. But the panches should be such people as had not been involved in any quarrel or case. The whole village agreed, but when the search began for such people, not a single person could be found who was not connected in some way with one party or another.

The idea of mutual settlement had come up in Bhogendraji's presence. Bhogendraji had come to Kamalpur for a programme. When he was about to leave, dozens of people from the opposing party, that is, the other party, came and said to him:

"Whatever happened in those days happened; whatever you say, we are ready for it."

Bhogendraji gave his view: everyone should sit together and end the dispute through mutual understanding. After that, Bhogendraji also kept asking again and again:

"What happened?"

Close behind the sharecropping movement, the

movement against usury was also going on. Ninety-five per cent of the people in the village were under debt, whether in grain and water or in rupees and money. Just as there had been landlord-masters, there had also been mahajan-masters. Meanwhile, everyone had already heard the legal point from Bhogendraji's mouth: no matter how old a debt might be, more than double could not be taken. Because of this, confidence had formed in everyone's mind. Society had stopped repaying the mahajans' debts. Of course, there were scattered incidents: catching and holding people, abuse and quarrels, many such things happened. But collectively, not even once did society act in a single mass confrontation.

Madhubani district had been formed by then. Nityanand Babu was the District Magistrate. Lakhnaur block had not yet begun functioning formally. All twenty-eight panchayats still belonged to Madhepur block. A meeting of the BDC was scheduled in Kamalpur. Nitya Babu himself also came. During the programme, while discussing moneylending and then speaking of banks, he distributed debt-relief certificates.

Only a small number of debtors received certificates; the general body of debtors did not. Yet this much certainly happened: those who had the heaviest burden of debt received certificates. When the mahajans too added up their accounts, they understood that twelve annas, that is, three-fourths of their loans, were slipping away. They loosened their hold over the business. In the meantime, one large mahajan died, and in his family, divided among four brothers, separation took place. The members of all four branches were such that they were either in service or engaged in their own occupations. When the moneylending of the big mahajan came to an

end, the smaller moneylenders and traders drew back their hands and feet out of confusion and shame.

The condition of the village had become such that whether there was a daughter's marriage in a family or a shraddha after a death, the work could not be managed without taking a loan. The young men of the village put all their strength into making their lives stand on their own. Because of this, small trades and agriculture also began to change colour. The condition of the village began to improve day by day.

The influence of Kamalpur also fell upon the surrounding villages, and ideological conflict began there as well. Just as Kamalpur had many castes and supporters of many sects, so did other villages. A little less here, a little more there, but such variety existed in every village. Even without the influence of Communist thought, conflicts did take place in society between one person and another; but those conflicts were for personal prestige and face-saving. They brought no newness into society. On the contrary, they caused one loss or another. With the rise of Communist thought, a turn came in conflict, even in mutual quarrels. Once that turn came, the existing order was affected in the opposite direction. This had a good effect on the economic and educational life of society. Until then, education had remained in the grip of a handful of castes; that grip began to loosen. Schools and colleges may not have increased at a very rapid pace, but they did increase slowly. Until then, occupations and enterprises had remained tied like tethered oxen among particular castes; change came there as well.

Madhepur block was a block with a long and wide area. It stretched in the east to the eastern bank of the

Kosi and in the west to the western bank of the Kamala. Mataras was a panchayat of the Kosi area. It was like the wish-fulfilling cow, Kamadhenu. In the name of the havoc caused by the Kosi, many convenient works kept taking place there. In many other panchayats too, the majority of the population understood government to mean only quota sugar, wheat and kerosene. What more did they need? Because of this, the managers of the panchayat had sweets in both hands. The mukhiya of Mataras panchayat belonged to a family whose ancestors had owned most of the village land and had also carried on moneylending. Of course, the moneylending had begun to disappear underneath, but through government income both his mind and his wealth remained full.

Some mukhiyas of Madhepur block placed a burden upon the mukhiya of Mataras: two brothers of Ramkisun of Kamalpur had been married in Mataras, and both girls should be forcibly taken out of Hiralal's house and brought back to Mataras. Understanding this as part of his politics, the mukhiya of Mataras accepted the responsibility gladly. The pramukh took upon himself the responsibility for Kamalpur panchayat, promising that he would not allow any kind of obstruction or resistance.

At twelve in the day, people from one or two tolas, that is, people of Hiralal's caste tola, gathered. Along with them, the men who had come with the pramukh also joined, and all of them moved as one body towards Hiralal's place. The three brothers, including Ramkisun, and the parents, Hiralal and his wife, five persons in all, were sitting in the courtyard of the darbajja. They looked at one another with raised eyes, and then, like goats brought for inspection before sacrifice, lowered their faces and silently began counting the final moments of

their lives. Shamelessness too has its limit; but going beyond even that, the mukhiya of Mataras stood at the threshold of the courtyard and forcibly took away both daughters, daughters whom he had already given in marriage, by catching them by the arms and pulling them out of the courtyard.

Till the very end, Hiralal and his wife kept saying only this:

"They are your daughters. If you want to take them, take your own."

And that is what happened. The leaders left with the two girls. Talk of the right and wrong of the incident spread through the area. Most ordinary people of the villages condemned the act. In the minds of Ramkisun and his father, both firm in their thought, the idea became still harder. The caste to which Ramkisun belonged was small in number in the area. That is to say, there were only a few counted villages where people of Ramkisun's caste lived. Until then, according to the tradition that had continued, the marriages of sons and daughters had taken place within the caste. Just as the mukhiya of Mataras had marriage relations in all the villages, Ramkisun too had marriage relations in all the villages. In support of their own kin, the relatives in every village, some on the mukhiya's side and some on Ramkisun's, raised their heads. Exchanges between the two sides gradually turned into abuse, and that too spread from village to village. On top of this, the Communist Party, the party in which Ramkisun was a leader, began to raise the matter strongly from the village platform to the block and district platforms. As in the Ramayan, where Bali draws away half the strength of his

enemy, something of the same kind happens between truth and falsehood, between the right and the wrong: truth receives its own strength along with half the strength of falsehood. Because of this, in the ideological struggle, Ramkisun's view rose higher and the mukhiya's view was pressed down.

There was one more thing. Ramkisun's father-in-law was a mahant of the Ramaut panth. He had built a temple at his own darbajja and had made disciples in other villages as well. Like landlords and moneylenders, mahants too had their own paths of income open. After he brought his daughter back to his own house, his thought came under heavy attack. Many disciples began to speak harsh, unspeakable things to his face. The roads to village after village closed for him, and his income too declined. Yet truth has its own importance. However influential a person may be, truth too has its own effect. After some days, Mahantji lost his earlier firmness and corrected his thinking. Once his thinking changed, Mahantji himself decided that he would send the girl, his daughter, back to Ramkisun's family. But how was that to happen?

He treated people from village after village as panches and leaders, and placed upon them the responsibility of this work, that is, the responsibility of sending his daughter back. Hiralal's cousin from his father's sister's side came to Kamalpur and said to Hiralal:

"Bhaiya, whatever fault belonged to that day has happened. Now bring the girl back to your house."

Hiralal said:

"Just as the people of Mataras took their daughter out of my house, if they bring her back into the house and

hand her over, I shall keep her.”

The matter came and stopped there. A year passed. Both girls and the girls’ mother began to dry up with worry. Both girls fell ill. The people of Mataras remained stuck on the point that the people of Kamalpur should come and take the girls away. Hiralal had tied a knot in his thought: just as the people of Mataras had taken their daughters out of the house, so must they bring them back and hand them over. I shall not go to bring them. If anyone asked Hiralal to get his sons married again, he gave the same answer to everyone: let the people of the daughters first marry off their daughters elsewhere; after that I shall arrange my sons’ marriages. If the marriages do not take place within the caste, I shall arrange them in another caste, but that too only after the daughters have been married.

Slowly, time passed. Three years went by. Meanwhile, Mahantji’s own circle of disciples, the villages in which he had created followers and built up the panth, all broke away from him. In the end, a settlement was reached. People from other villages took the lead and brought both girls back to Hiralal’s family and handed them over.

The two daughters-in-law did return to Hiralal’s family, but the affection that had existed earlier, before they had been taken away from Kamalpur, had diminished. Even so, Hiralal’s enthusiasm became more than doubled, because success had been gained not merely between two families but between two social visions.

Ramkisun also became a district-level leader of his party, the Communist Party, that is, a member of the

party's district council. As time passed, Ramkisun's influence too continued to grow. He established his presence as a fearless worker. Within society, within the society of Kamalpur, an ideological turn was already coming. The very people of the caste society of Kamalpur who had stood with the village pramukh and the mukhiya of Mataras in taking the girls out of Ramkisun's family now came over to Ramkisun's side. A new generation also rose and stood up, and the influence of the older generation began to decline. In the meantime, Madhepur block was divided. Fourteen panchayats of the block were brought together to form Lakhnaur block. Some panchayats too were divided, and their number increased. Mataras remained in Madhepur block, while Kamalpur came under Lakhnaur block. Because of this, the earlier relationship, that is, the relationship between the mukhiya of Mataras and the mukhiya or pramukh of Kamalpur, also began to weaken.

As the Communist movement in Kamalpur grew day by day, the influence of the party increased, and the opposing party, that is, the village opposition group, began to break apart. The feudal tendencies that had existed in the pramukh until then became still more aggressive. Because of this, with the help of the police sub-inspector of the thana, he had the buffalo of a village barber of the Pasari caste untied from the darbajja and forcibly taken away. The buffalo owner was, at that time, a defendant in a case, and so he could not seize the buffalo back directly. But three days after the buffalo had been taken, he beat the pramukh, the mukhiya of Kamalpur, severely. After being beaten, the mukhiya's influence declined considerably. Disputes then began even among his own supporters.

Among the three brothers, Ramkisun was the middle one. Nanulal was the elder brother and Jeevanlal the younger. After a year and a half, Nanulal had a daughter. Nanulal's wife had, in any case, become weak and ill from the events of life, and after childbirth she became still weaker. Before a year had passed, she died, but the daughter survived. Some time later, Nanulal married a second time.

Within four years, Ramkisun had two daughters. Ramkisun's wife too had become quite weak. The elder daughter had reached the age of two and a half years, but the younger had not even completed one year when, in the meantime, Ramkisun's wife also died. This increased Ramkisun's difficulties within the family. Yet, while managing the family, Ramkisun remained connected with the party in the same way as before. Meanwhile another event took place: within a year or so of each other, Ramkisun's mother and father, that is, both Hiralal and his wife, also died.

Nanulal's second marriage had been arranged by Hiralal himself while he was still alive. Later, Ramkisun's wife died. A year after his wife's death, Ramkisun married again. The two daughters from the first wife were, of course, still there. After the death of his daughter, that is, of Ramkisun's wife, Mahantji's heart broke still more, for she had been his only child. The earlier sense and awareness that Mahantji had possessed changed considerably. He had ten or twelve bighas of land of his own. More than half of it had, of course, fallen into streams and watercourses, but even then four or five bighas remained where cultivation was possible.

On one side there was his age, for he had crossed

seventy; on the other, his wife too had died. Mahantji's mind was torn and scattered. As long as he lived in the village, his wife arranged food, drink and other things. When he travelled among his disciples, he carried the idol of the temple with him in a basket, and so there was no need for worship in the village during those days. In his own village, Mahantji had given his wife the kanthi and made her his disciple, so he did not observe impurity in her cooking and serving food. But when he visited his disciples, even if the woman of the family he was visiting had become his disciple and taken the kanthi, he did not eat food cooked or touched by her. He cooked with his own hands and then ate. This does not mean that he always received food according to his own liking. He did keep one attendant, a disciple, with him, but that man would arrange everything needed for cooking and place it near the hearth; Mahantji himself would cook with his own hands.

In the twelve months of the year, Mahantji travelled among his disciples for six months and remained in the village for six months, conducting worship and festivals in the temple. Once a year, in the name of the temple's consecration, he also held a bhandara, to which he invited all his disciples in groups. There was the bhandara, and for two days Mahantji also delivered discourses. His disciples regarded it as their guru's place and came with more importance than they gave to other kin. They brought their own provisions and water, and also offerings for the deity. Along with the temple consecration, Mahantji held another festival too: Ram Navami. This he celebrated among the village society rather than among his disciples alone. In it, from Ram bhajan to Ram Lila, he presented everything before

society. In a single year, in one village itself, the slaying of Ravana takes place at dozens of places in different forms. Yet what kind of Ravana is this, who remains alive even after being slain? As long as there is the Ramayan, Ram and Ravana will remain; and as long as there is the Mahabharat, Ekalavya and Dronacharya too will remain. Well, let it go. That belongs to the thought of the past.

It was the month of Baisakh. The sun was blazing. At three in the afternoon, Mahantji reached Kamalpur, the village of his daughter and son-in-law. Kamalpur, where Mahantji had once been welcomed as a samdhi, a respected in-law, now appeared to him like an orchard and garden burnt by fire. His own child had gone before him; the son-in-law who had once been his son-in-law now seemed to have become someone else's son-in-law. And seeing his two granddaughters, Mahantji's mind became almost uncontrollable. The moment he stepped on to the darbajja, he called out to his granddaughter:

"Beti Shanti, come here."

Shanti, Mahantji's elder granddaughter, was startled to hear the word beti from the mouth of a man who looked like a holy elder. Just then Ramkisun himself came out from the orchard and had only reached the front of the darbajja when Mahantji said:

"Pahun, I shall take Shanti with me. I shall raise her, bring her up, and perform her **kanyadaan** with my own hands. There will be no burden on you."

Many thoughts rose together in Ramkisun's unsettled mind, but he said only this much:

"First wash your hands and feet and eat something. Afterwards, whatever is to happen will be understood." ❑

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By the time 1974 arrived, Kamalpur had become a Kurukshetra in the flow of ideas. Not one but many questions had risen and stood before society. On one side, feudal thought began to enter the field of action with force; on the other, Communist thought also gathered its own momentum. As a result, clashes began to occur both in word and in deed.

The condition of the country itself was becoming oriented towards farmers. New techniques and other facilities began to be made available to them. Wheat had been coming from America on loan, but that arrangement broke down during the Bangladesh war. Indiraji was the Prime Minister. She framed the Twenty-Point Programme and took firm steps towards making the country self-reliant on the question of food. Because of this, a flush of new life began to appear on the faces of villages that had been uprooted and ruined.

The farmers of Kamalpur too moved forward. Thinking of installing borewells, five men together became ready to take borewell sets and pumps. New incentives began to reach farmers. The government began to provide assistance as a subsidy on one-third, that is, thirty-three per cent, of the loan.

When the five men sat together and discussed the use of the borewells, they estimated, on the basis of twenty **bighas** per borewell, that the water requirement of half the village's cultivation would be met. Once the farmers received the facility of water, production was bound to increase. At first, all five had thought of getting borewells installed. But as soon as the work process began, that is, the bank and government procedures for the borewell and pump-set started, two men withdrew from the idea. Three men, Mangaldev, Ramkisun and Ramdev, stood firm by their decision and each had one borewell sunk. At that time, the State Bank had opened at Jhanjharpur, and from that bank all three received the borewell and pump-set as a loan.

Like Mangaldev, Ramkisun and Ramdev too made their presence felt in society as new farmers. A newness began in the farming of Kamalpur. But hundreds of problems also rose and stood before society. Whispers began to move among people like restless bulls. Kamalpur became the centre of the whole block, Lakhnaur block. Just as a clash began within society over the art of farming, so too a clash began over the ideology of the village.

In fields where, even after crops were standing, ploughing bullocks had such freedom that they could roam about openly without being stopped, stray cattle now began to be restrained. Voices began to rise at the village crossroads: "If he sets foot in my orchard or grove, I shall cut off his leg." Elsewhere voices rose: "If he makes a channel for borewell water through my field, I shall cut him down with that very spade and bury him in that very channel."

Of the five men, the two who did not install borewells withdrew because they had become so influenced by feudal thinking, by thought inherited from the past, that they stepped back.

Within society, opposition had also arisen earlier to hand-pumps in place of wells. The argument was that in a hand-pump there was a leather washer, and therefore the water coming out of it was impure. With such water, neither worship could be performed nor any homa or japa. In the same way, voices were rising against the huller and the flour mill: how could anything pounded and ground by the dheki and the hand-stone be the same as what came from a huller or a mill?

Like people in other villages, the people of Kamalpur too had withdrawn from the field of work. Behind this withdrawal, their minds had formed at least this much belief: the God who had torn open the mouth and given birth would surely carry the burden of filling that mouth; what, then, was the need for one's own labour?

Government facilities and the system, the machinery of administration, became one-sided. After small incidents, the police sub-inspector of the thana began to impose the heaviest possible sections in cases against Communist Party workers. On the other hand, even if the other side committed a major incident, no hearing took place at the thana. Thus, just as the attitude of the thana was one-sided, the attitude of the block office too became one-sided.

At that time, old-age pension and unemployment allowance for educated young men had begun. The form of the village became strange. Where everyone above sixty should have received old-age pension, even men of

twenty-five or thirty who supported feudal thought received it. But if someone above sixty belonged to a family connected with the Communist Party, he did not receive a pension. Even after spending days and nights on the work, even after almost licking the dust of the block office in pursuit of old-age pension, they did not receive it. The same thing happened in the matter of allowances for educated unemployed youth.

Be that as it may, this much even the unlettered and inexperienced could see with their own eyes: the block office and the thana belonged to a few particular people; they did not belong to the common people. Everything was happening before their eyes, yet there was no one to stop it. And how could they have stopped it? When the basic questions of life stood before them, it would not have been proper to leave them aside and become entangled in smaller questions.

Those who belonged to the Communist Party ignored the smaller disputes and wanted to bring out the new face of the farmer. Most people in society were connected with farming and had made it the main basis of life. Government institutions, that is, institutions connected with farmers, also kept their activities alive. They took traditional seeds of grain, fruit, vegetables and so on, improved them, and carried them towards the farmers; and the farmers too took hold of them and strengthened their cultivation.

Of course, some villages of Lakhnaur block had already been connected with cash crops. They did practise cash-crop farming according to the old methods of cultivation. But society had tied them within a caste boundary. That boundary was this: a particular crop

belonged to a particular caste, and therefore other castes kept away from it. The western and southern villages, the panchayats of Lakhnaur block, lie on both sides of the Kamala river. Not only today, but from the time the embankment of the Kamala was built, just as the flow of water gave facilities, so too, when it broke year after year, the uprooting of the area continued. Whatever that may be, this much is true: whatever opportunity of cultivation a farmer gets at a given time, he plants that crop and sustains his life through it.

With the first collective instalment of borewells in Kamalpur, farming received a surge. It may not have reached the farming of the whole village, but it cannot be said that it did not reach some fields. The average yield of paddy in the village had been one **maund** per **katha**, measured by the old **kachchi seer**, a maund equal to thirty kilos. Whether people understood it as a maund of forty seers or forty-eight seers is not the matter here. The point is this: where a maund of paddy per katha had once been considered a good yield, the arrival of Pusa-21 paddy and Sonara-64 wheat brought a fourfold leap in production.

Where fruit and fruit-bearing crops had been produced in older forms, new forms arrived there too. With improvement in seeds and plants, fruit production also took a leap. Just as grain, vegetables, mango and other fruits brought a new look to the village, so too a newness entered the curiosity of the farmers.

By 1975-76, a glow had appeared on the face of Kamalpur. The village as it had been until then, especially in relation to farming, saw good progress. With the many-sided use of fields, progress came in several forms at

once. A number of favourable circumstances also developed.

Agricultural research farms were opened at Pusa and Dholi, Pusa then being in Darbhanga district, for at that time Darbhanga had not yet been divided, and Dholi being in Muzaffarpur district. Farmers began to receive solutions to many kinds of problems from these research farms, and an agricultural revolution too came. At the block level, a department connected with agriculture expanded, and an office opened under the P.O. It began functioning at the block level. In each village, that is, in each panchayat, one Village Level Worker (V.L.W.) was appointed. These workers began to give farmers information related to agriculture.

At the block office, farmers began to receive information about new agricultural implements, and immediately, in subsidised form from the government, capital too began to come into their hands. On one side there were hand-operated implements, and on the other inexperienced farmers who had to operate them. Therefore, many obstacles naturally arose. Even so, the farmers moved forward and brought tractors to the village for ploughing the fields.

At first, the V.L.W. worked mainly by providing information and subsidies for paddy and wheat among grains, and for **tori** among oilseeds. But whenever a farmers' fair was held at the Pusa farm, he would also encourage farmers to take part in it. The farm carried out programmes according to its capacity, and farmers gained one benefit or another from them. New varieties of paddy and wheat seeds, improved varieties of vegetable seeds, and many kinds of improved fruit seeds

and saplings began to become available. The farmers of Kamalpur took advantage of these facilities. In the present atmosphere, there would hardly be any grain in Kamalpur whose improved seed has not arrived.

Mangaldev and Ramkisun also developed an ideological relationship with Nagendraji, that is, Dr Nagendra Kumar Jha of Paitghat, Lohna. The movement between them was regular: just as Nagendraji came to Kamalpur to meet Mangaldev and Ramkisun, so too Ramkisun and Mangaldev went to Paitghat. In this way, a family relationship grew between them. Nagendraji's elder brother too was a man immersed in Communist thought, but he spent more time on the Nepal side. Therefore the kind of close relationship that should have developed with Ramkisun and Mangaldev could not quite take shape. Even so, this much certainly happened: they came to know each other.

Dr Dhirendra had some particular difficulties of his own. He was a college teacher, and therefore had few holidays; because of this, he came to the village only rarely, and meetings with him were almost negligible. Yet the bond with one's soil and water remained so strong that, like Dhumketu, Dr Dhirendra too did not take Nepali citizenship. Their father, Nagendraji's father, the late Bhuvneshwar Jha, lived in the village and was active enough to have planted a flower garden of more than a hundred varieties at the darbajja. Just as he was active in planting flowers, so too his speech and conduct were full of life. Because of this, the relationship grew day by day and remained intact until the very end of his life. That same relationship continues even now.

In the social outline that had existed until then, their

contribution, the contribution of Nagendraji and his family, was considerable. Whatever may be said of grain and water, their collection of fruits and flowers was certainly praiseworthy. Even now it remains a treasure within society. Hundreds of new varieties of flowers came to Kamalpur. The five-faced aparajita, both white and black, which the people of Kamalpur had not planted until then, now began to adorn their courtyards and darbajjas. In the same way, madhavi, rajnigandha, rajbela and other flowers spread through the village gardens.

Meanwhile, around 1974-75, another idea rose and stood in Kamalpur. The idea was this: in a country where everyone has received the right to vote and where the right to equality has also been granted equally to all, it is not good for untouchability to remain in society. Therefore it should be changed in practice. To bring such a change into practice, there were many grounds, but two were especially important. The first was untouchability within society, from eating and drinking to physical contact. This too had several forms, but two were main. One was the case of people with whom physical contact was allowed, but untouchability appeared at the time of eating and drinking. The second was the case of people whose handmade things were used by families and society in special acts such as yajna and japa, and also in ordinary work, yet not only eating and drinking with them, but even touching their bodies, was considered polluting.

Caught in the midst of many problems, the people of Kamalpur reflected on the question of untouchability. There were two questions together. The first concerned the caste issue linked with the formation of families and with relations with other societies; this could not be solved by one society alone. But this much could certainly

be done: in one another's family-related work, people could at least stand together. Society could gain this much at least: if there was avoidance in eating, drinking or physical contact, that should be removed. Until each defect is removed from society, how will uniformity come into society? And until uniformity comes into society, how will the current of thought in an ideological society flow? Until the flow of thought joins life in its essential form, how will society think collectively about what is good and bad?

After all these discussions, the society of Kamalpur, which had already begun to flow within one stream of thought, could not be called a society that wished to keep a defective problem alive. Yet such a society existed too. Not only did it exist, it existed with its many kinds of weapons. Be that as it may, this much had happened: a group had certainly formed in the village across all castes, in which people of all castes had begun to sit together, eat and drink together, and discuss matters together.

Even today, in the country, there are societies where untouchability appears to have been erased in one place, while in another it is still visible like thick letters written with a fat pencil on a slate blackened with soot. Whatever that may be, let it remain. But in Kamalpur this much has certainly happened: people of all castes now take full part in wedding processions and in carrying the bier at a death. Of course, when fire breaks out, everyone gathers together even now.

With the formation of an organisation of all castes, whatever their numerical strength, once they came together, uniformity appeared not only in weddings, processions and feasts, but also in the works and

occupations of life, that is, in livelihood. Sitting together and eating and drinking also brought improvement in the arrangement of food items. It is also true that there is not a single caste whose arrangement of all things is one hundred per cent advanced. That too is natural. Whether grain, fruit or vegetables, some are good and some are poor. Therefore, where good things are available, the manner of using them will improve. But where the sole concern is somehow to keep life alive, there, like Vishwamitra, even forbidden food becomes food.

As relations were being formed among all castes in Kamalpur, many kinds of weapons were also being used to break those relations. Lakhan filed a case over the land that Hiralal, Ramkisun's father, had bought. Everyone in society could see plainly that Hiralal had bought the field from the people of Jhanjharpur by paying **jarasiman**. Everyone buys land; people buy land in every village. Then why was a case filed there? And that too when Hiralal had always been ploughing and cultivating that field. Even before he bought it, he had been cultivating it as a sharecropper.

The society of Kamalpur is, after all, like the society of other villages. Power seizes things by its own rules and procedures; society too seizes things by its own rules and procedures. Where authority could take over an entire property, a whole field, if revenue was not paid for two years, can one say that there are no such people in society who do not seize? They do. In other words, every society has loud-mouthed strongmen, people who do improper work. Their roots may or may not be connected with power. In between, there is also the petty contractor. That is, the real contractor remains connected with power and, according to his strength, keeps a small army of his own.

Such armies exist in every society. They have always pushed aside the weak and the voiceless.

Be that as it may, is Kamalpur outside society, or is it part of this very society? Will there not be people here who make a livelihood by working as court agents, who sustain themselves through ration quotas, who take and give the same piece of land under jarasiman three times, who seize another's land without right, who pluck mangoes from orchards and bring jackfruit from jackfruit groves? Orchards and groves too have contributed greatly to society. Along with the environment, they give the nectar-like fruit of the mango and distribute the life-giving sap of palm and date. Of course, Kamalpur is not like those villages which, on seeing palm trees from outside, are called villages of toddy drinkers. But can one say that in the homestead bushes there is no growth of bhang and dhatura? That too exists. Whatever exists, let it remain. Since it is a village, if these things exist, then at most one can say that, like other villages, Kamalpur too has its geography. Its history may be different from that of other villages, but its geography is the same. Even so, there is difference in Kamalpur's geography too. Since the trees are tall, lightning too falls more often. Compared with other villages, Kamalpur has more high land and more embankments and roads, and so, unlike some other villages, there is no need to fill up water bodies in order to make homestead land.

Around 1974-75, the mentality of some people in the village was such that they believed only they understood matters of cases and lawsuits, while the rest of the villagers knew nothing. Even without any basis, cases were created, and land-grabbing had long been taking place according to the behaviour of the courts. Lakhan Jha

was such a grabber. It was this Lakhan Jha who brought a case against Hiralal's land. Everyone knew and saw that it was a plain act of theft, yet a thief is not called a thief until the court gives him the certificate of being one. In the eyes of the law, a person may not be called a thief, but in society, in people's minds, he is accepted as one.

Circumstance stood with Hiralal. By circumstance, I mean that the field was near Hiralal's house. Along with that, Ramkisun's influence had already been tested in society on several fronts. Before this, Ramkisun had already taken possession of sikmi land, and so enthusiasm also remained in his mind. Even before Hiralal's land case, Lakhan Jha had received a severe blow in society. That is to say, in a similar false case, Dinesh Jha and his people had beaten Lakhan Jha's side thoroughly, kept the land in their own possession, and won the case in court. Because of this, Lakhan Jha's mind had already been weakened in society. But after Durga Puja, that is, after 1969, he received the support of a new force.

Before Durga Puja, the colour and manner of Kamalpur society had been somewhat different. Much of it changed after Durga Puja, and much of it certainly improved as well.

This was an incident from a year earlier, that is, a year before Durga Puja began in Kamalpur in 1969, when the independent country had already completed twenty-one years of adult franchise. A wedding procession came from Khajurbani to Kamalpur. It was a large and impressive procession. Behind its size and display lay an old quarrel.

The distance between Khajurbani and Kamalpur was eight **kos**, twenty miles by the old measure and about

thirty to thirty-five kilometres by the present measure. On caste grounds, the people of Khajurbani had a long-standing rivalry with the people of Tadbani, like a rivalry between buffaloes. In the last three or four MLA elections, that rivalry had increased. Once the people of Tadbani saw a man of Khajurbani walking on the road in front of their darbajja wearing shoes. They called him to the darbajja, made him hold his ears, and ordered him to cross the boundary of the village carrying his shoes in his hands. At that moment, feeling helpless, the man of Khajurbani accepted the command of the people of Tadbani, but a fire was lit in his heart.

In reply to that insult, the people of Khajurbani gathered their caste strength and, at that very darbajja where their man had been made to hold his ears and carry his shoes in his hands beyond the village boundary, they arranged three kinds of dance troupes. More than a hundred bullock carts with tyres and sand-carts came in the wedding procession. The number of wedding guests was over seven hundred. Many wore shoes and socks and carried umbrellas; most had come on foot, while most of the carts were loaded with provisions, food items and utensils. They had brought their own carpets, their own chairs. There was also plenty of space in front of the darbajja. They resolved to stay for three days: just as the people of their society had been made to hold their ears and accept an order, so too the villagers of Tadbani would be made to accept one. The wedding procession would be halted for three days, and the dancers would perform.

The behaviour of the Khajurbani people threw Tadbani into confusion. Hundreds of young men from Khajurbani were also moving about on all the village roads. Fortunately, Pandit Musari Jha was present in the

village. In the village, because of one practical habit or another, Pandit Musari Jha would always fall into quarrel with someone or the other. Because of this, he had come to stand almost alone in his thinking. But he did not feel even the slightest sorrow about it. He read the Gita regularly every day, and he believed that the Gita was not merely a scripture, but a weapon for life. When a human being, through the discipline of balancing income and expenditure, gathers the weapon of life's balance, only then can he bring change in the season like the Hathiya constellation. Then the weather of life becomes gentle and moves joyfully in its own ease.

The outspoken and influential men of Tadbani society thought that the confused condition into which the village had now fallen could not be handled without Musari Jha. Therefore, they all decided to go, catch hold of him and place the responsibility upon him; only then would the village be saved.

Seeing the people of society at his darbajja, Panditji said:

"From which direction has the sun risen today that I see all of you crowding my darbajja?"

Panditji had, of course, already received all the news of the village. But Musari Jha, who kept himself apart from society, did not feel the slightest uneasiness. That is why he spoke fearlessly.

Hearing Musari Jha's words, everyone began looking at one another's face. No one found the courage to speak. Panditji repeated:

"Let society accept its mistake; only then can I take up the responsibility."

Seeing Panditji's courage, seeing the sharpness of

Musari Jha's thought, Dholba Jha said:

"Panditji, will you alone take up the burden of the village?"

Panditji had such faith in his own study and reflection that, though one man cannot carry the paddy load of an entire village's fields in Agahan, ideology is such an eternal quality that, let alone, not merely, the paddy load of one village, it can carry the paddy load of the fields of the whole world. Fearlessly, Musari Jha replied to Dholba Jha:

"If the whole village together gives me the responsibility, why should I not be able to carry the burden of the village alone?"

Swept by the current of Panditji's thought, Dholba Jha, without consulting anyone else, said from his own impulse:

"You have been given the responsibility of the whole village. Go and settle it."

Panditji felt a little hesitation in his mind. Dholba Jha was an unwise man; it would not be proper to give weight to his words. But then another thought within him urged him: Dholba was not alone; other thick-headed and loud-mouthed men too were with him. Since all of them had come together to the darbajja, must they not have thought together beforehand and made one man their speaker?

Panditji also thought that society as it had existed until now was such that its threads were either as hard as old, tough fibre or as weak as raw cotton thread, which snaps at the slightest touch. Then he thought again: human beings too have the force of their own minds; under that very force the villagers had remained pressed

down, while the outsiders had risen. The wedding guests too were not all of one kind, equally aware of the fine line of honour and dishonour in society. Who knew whether some incident might occur by which both societies would have their nose and ears cut off in shame? Therefore, it would be better if, as quickly as possible, the outsiders were respectfully moved out of the village.

Stopping everyone, stopping the whole society, from moving ahead, Musari Jha said:

“Since the responsibility of the village has come upon me, settling it becomes my duty. All of you go back to your own places. After one hour has passed, the best possible news will reach everyone’s ears.”

Quickly, Musari Jha took tobacco and lime into his mouth and, though his legs were short in proportion to his body, he moved at a brisk pace towards the leading organiser of the wedding procession, the man whose son’s wedding procession it was. Seeing Panditji, why would anyone have any doubt in his mind? People of the area knew Musari Jha. Just as among four-footed creatures even a small animal like the mouse has great skill in making a house, so too Pandit Musari Jha had skill in handling situations.

With respect, Himmatlal, whose son was to be married, said:

“Panditji, whatever your order is, we shall accept it.”

Seeing the weight he carried, Panditji’s own mind told him that it would not be proper to speak at once to the wedding party without asking or hearing anything. Therefore he lifted his face towards the wedding guests, so that whoever had anything to say could say it openly before him; then he would consider it face to face and

move ahead while nodding his head.

From among the wedding guests, Fochai said:

"Will your villagers no longer loot the votes of the area and bring them here?"

Musari Jha said:

"They will not bring them now. Looking ahead, you too have to reach on time; therefore let everyone make good use of the time."

Saying this, Musari Jha stood up. As soon as he rose, Himmatlal signalled with his hand to the dancers to stop the performance. All the outside wedding guests took their own roads and left.

As soon as the outside wedding guests crossed the boundary of Tadbani, the villagers let out a long breath. But in Pandit Musari Jha's mind, a third thought kept dancing. The thought was this: if the villagers, having made him their leader, later fooled him in the matter of the earlier incident, he would bear it; that belonged to a past day. But would the heroes of the village crossroads accept his thought? If they did not accept it, why should he himself get trapped in the greed of serving the dung of others' bullocks? Then, immediately, his own mind said to him: whatever has happened till now belongs to a past day, but the present and the future standing upon the present lie ahead. If he did not bend his own society and bring it on to the path, then future insult would certainly come. Therefore, would it not be better to bind his own society in accordance with the social relations that exist among outsiders, among other societies, almost like international law, and move forward? By the time his thought reached here, Musari Jha's mind agreed that this would be the best path for the present.

When each wedding guest from Khajurbani had crossed the boundary of Tadbani, those who had hidden in trees, that is, those who had climbed up into trees out of fear on seeing the outsiders from Khajurbani, also came down one by one and began distributing news among society like men carrying tidings. One said, “I had climbed a mango tree and saw the whole play.” Another said, “I saw it from a shisham tree; even the smallest child of Khajurbani crossed the boundary.”

Without being called, the whole village, the people of Tadbani, began crowding at Musari Jha’s place to hear the conversation that had taken place between him and the people of Khajurbani. Seeing the crowd, Musari Jha’s own mind began to circle and turn. Whichever way he looked, he saw knot upon knot. He could not see any way of untangling them.

Panditji thought: just as everyone in society had gathered together without thinking, so, in thought, the upper layer of the ground had become crusted like a field cracked by heat. Where the upper layer itself has hardened and cracked, speaking or doing anything is no child’s play. Seeing Panditji silent and still, Tengarlal said:

“Panditji, tell us too what you have thought.”

Panditji thought within himself: this is not roasted maize, where there will be no separate pocket or fold, where everything becomes puffed grain together. This is society. It is like the fold of a dal bag, so thick that how can work proceed without separating it caste by caste? And will that happen in this hurry? Out of confusion and embarrassment, Panditji fell silent.

He thought: the relations between one village society and another, marriage ties, feast relations,

dealings over fields and open lands, and connections through dance and song, how they should move according to time is neither the thought of one day nor the fruit of one act. Scientific development has struck with such force that, on the stage of the world, the largest companies and capitalists can rise overnight with a roar, and the largest companies can also collapse overnight and become bankrupt.

Calming his mind, Musari Jha said:

"Brothers, seeing the outsiders, the village became so shaken that my wife is close to fainting. Therefore let me first attend to her. Conversation is not running away anywhere; it will take place later."

As soon as people heard the name of a neighbour's illness, just as society begins to feel ill one by one, so, hearing of Panditji's wife's illness, everyone became like the sick and slowly slipped away.

Two years after the Tadbani incident, another incident took place in Kamalpur, again in connection with a wedding procession. The second year's Durga Puja would take place six months later; this incident had occurred six months before the first year's Puja.

What happened was this: the marriage of a daughter of Kamalpur was fixed with the son of a man from Ghuskipatti. The two villages were four **kos** apart. From long ago, marriage relations between the two villages had existed and still exist. They exist among most castes. But Ghuskipatti is not like Kamalpur. In terms of caste numbers, one caste has dominance in Ghuskipatti. Because of this, in the eyes of outsiders, the village is good for some and bad for others. It is good for the caste that has dominance; and for the caste that does not have

dominance, that remains pressed down, the village becomes bad. Ghuskipatti is not the only such village; there are many others like it.

The people of Ghuskipatti and the people of Kamalpur also had another relation: **jatihar** feasts. There was a caste circle of twenty-one villages, also called the **sabha**, but it did not include all castes. The reason was that some castes of Kamalpur considered themselves to be of good lineage and regarded the people of Ghuskipatti as of lower lineage. Therefore, neither marriage relations nor jatihar or sabhaiti feasts took place between them. Some castes of Kamalpur did, however, have sabhaiti and jatihar feasts with them, because they considered themselves of the same level. Whatever it may be, whether it concerns the people of Kamalpur or the people of Ghuskipatti, what concern does the common person have with that? And when marriage relations and feast relations do exist between the two villages, there is no need to pick husks out of rice unnecessarily.

The marriage of Shubhkalal's son of Ghuskipatti was fixed with the daughter of Jeevanlal of Kamalpur. Shubhkalal's son was a B.A. graduate, but Jeevanlal's daughter had not even seen the face of a school. The present-day atmosphere did not exist then. Girls' education in society was less than one-tenth, and even that one-tenth existed among a few particular castes; among the remaining castes it was almost absent. A handful of men who worked outside, who kept their families outside, did educate their daughters a little. Therefore, at the time of fixing the marriage, the question of education did not arise.

Even so, within himself Jeevanlal's heart was soaked

with happiness. He would have a son-in-law as good as an educated son, and if his daughter lived with an educated husband, her future too would be good. Therefore the daughter's marriage had to be performed well. Like today, the disease of give-and-take, of cash dowry, had not yet spread among all castes. It had certainly entered a few particular castes, but it had not entered Jeevanlal's caste. When the question of the number of wedding guests arose between the two villagers, Jeevanlal brought five seers of mustard, placed it before Shubhkalal, and said that he should count the grains and bring the wedding guests according to that number.

Ghuskipatti is a border village, a village on the edge of two countries. For the groom, that is, for the son's marriage, Shubhkalal arranged a palanquin. Since the village band had taken shehnai in place of pipahi, he arranged for the shehnai band too. In the village there were only three tyre-carts and sixteen wooden carts, the means of transport within society. Since people gave importance to social work, society, as society, fulfilled at least this much responsibility: they served without taking hire or payment.

Shubhkalal arranged a a large, well-arranged wedding procession. Just as Shubhkalal gave himself fully for his son's marriage, so too Jeevanlal placed the prestige of society on the dice. As far as he understood the situation, Shubhkalal took care to send word to Jeevanlal ten days before the wedding that the wedding procession would not consist of only one caste; people of many castes would be there.

Just as Shubhkalal sent the message by hint, Jeevanlal understood within himself that since guests of

all castes would come, arrangements of all kinds would have to be made. Just as at a national-level programme, arrangements are made for all kinds of food, drink and lodging, so too it would have to be done here. Otherwise, one knows that at the national level, some people consider teetar an inedible item, while others do not regard it as outside the main arrangement of food.

Thinking of the village society, Jeevanlal went to Mangaldev's place for discussion and found Ramkisun sitting there too. Seeing both of them, Mangaldev and Ramkisun, Jeevanlal said:

"I had set out under a good omen; both kings have been found at one place."

Hearing Jeevanlal's words, Mangaldev began thinking within himself that in their area the bhatiyah style of speech had always been common; perhaps Jeevanlal had spoken in that manner. He remained silent and said nothing. Bhatiyah speech means speaking either by raising something above its measure or by lowering it below its measure. For instance, in this area Nanour is called an excellent village. But before saying that, one must first think what a village means. A village means a geographical form, connected with soil and water. Therefore, one should also discuss how deep the water layer lies beneath the land of Nanour. If a village is named according to its people, then it will be called so as a village society.

In any case, all three men, Mangaldev, Ramkisun and Jeevanlal, belonged to the same chatasar (group), and so in conversation they would speak more or less freely. Ramkisun said:

"Jeevan Bhai, why have you hidden your own name

from the third king?"

The atmosphere moved towards ease. Jeevanlal said:

"Mangal Bhai, people of all castes will be in the wedding procession, so...?"

Ramkisun interrupted in the middle and said:

"Whether they are of all castes or of one caste, a wedding procession is a wedding procession. However many come, there are enough darbajjas in the village. What is there to worry about?"

Even so, uneasiness was rising in Jeevanlal's mind. What troubled him was this: at the time of speaking, everyone says that caste and caste-pride are an old wives' tale. But how wide a net that old woman of falsehood has spread can be seen in MLA and MP elections. Jeevanlal might look smooth on both sides, like a rustic blanket: in Magh one wraps it around oneself, and in Jeth one spreads it on the ground. Pressing his thought within himself, Mangaldev said:

"There is no great worry about food and drink. The responsibility for curd goes to Maksoodan, the responsibility for shop goods to Singheshwar, the responsibility for cooking to Manohar, and the responsibility for welcome to the whole society. Is that not so?"

In today's atmosphere, everything is available commercially, from food and drink to seating and lodging, even cooks who will feed people. But in 1970-71 that was not the situation.

The wedding procession arrived. Arrangements were made for seating from darbajja to darbajja. At three darbajjas, the wedding guests were arranged according

to their own conditions and preferences. It was not the present-day atmosphere. After **parichhan**, when the groom is taken into the courtyard to the mandap, the women's rituals begin. Society is needed only to welcome the wedding party. At all three darbajjas, sharbat was served, and refreshments were being distributed when suddenly there was an uproar.

As soon as Mangaldev reached the place of the uproar, he asked:

"Why is there noise?"

Devnath said:

"Arrange two separate darbajjas for the two castes among us."

Mangaldev asked:

"The two together are only ten or eleven persons. Then what need is there for another darbajja?"

The dispute was between two castes: one, those who carried the palanquin; the other, those who played the shehnai.

Mangaldev knew that the mentality of a wedding party has always been to put the host village to shame. Yet society too, that is, the people of the village where the wedding procession comes, always thinks of its honour and dignity and takes hold of the form of peace. Only then will the tree of peace bear fruit and flowers, when people take hold of its root, plant it firmly, tend it, endure hardship for it, and keep the hope of fruit and flower in their hearts. But for that, worthy vessels are needed. In the society as it exists now, recognising the worthy and the unworthy is not easy.

Then another thought came at once into

Mangaldev's mind: in caste weddings and processions, some small friction happens in every village; it will happen in our village too. It will be no more than that. Like a flood in a stream, it will come and go. Why should one worry over it? If anything has happened, it is only this: whatever responsibility falls upon us, we must fulfil it honestly.

Repeating himself, Mangaldev said:

"If the householder, the person whose place the wedding procession has come to, does not have another darbajja, what will happen then?"

As though Devnath had already thought of it or understood it, he replied:

"If he has no darbajja, what of it? We shall stay in the shade of a bamboo clump, or in the shade of an orchard or grove."

Hearing Devnath's words, Mangaldev fell silent, for this thought too began to rise in his mind: there are darbajjas for so many wedding guests; how can there not be space for five or six men? In the meantime Jiyalal said:

"Mangal Bhaiya, my darbajja is empty. Come, let us go there."

In Lakhan Jha's case, the evidence did not carry as much strength as the atmosphere that Ramkisun's opponents began to create around it. Just as, when a jackal cries in some forest at three in the morning, jackals from forest to forest begin to answer, so voices began to rise from village to village in support of Lakhan Jha: the land had come to him from his ancestors.

People of wicked nature spend their own money to destroy the fish in another's pond, spend their own money to sprinkle petrol on another's house and burn it; it

is not that they do not spend their own money to ruin someone else. Be that as it may, this much had settled in Ramkisun's mind: land is held by strength, if not by one's own, then by someone else's. If Lakhan Jha was ready to pour all his strength into this land, then he too would throw all his strength behind it. What would be gained by beating drums before people of other villages? Wherever the wedding party may come from, the singing remains the village's own.

Until then, in his life, Ramkisun had not seen courts and legal proceedings. It had been only six or seven years since he had passed matriculation. From the mouths of villagers he had already heard many tales of courts and cases: how, in court, what lies face up may be turned face down, and what lies face down may be turned face up. Those people of society who had been doing court work until then were joining Lakhan Jha's tune to their own and loudly spreading statements against Ramkisun.

As it happened, Ramkisun stood firm, from the land itself to the court and kachahri, ready with all his life and strength. Among the young men of the village, Ramkisun had already gained a strong hold. Therefore, with courage, he entered the field and stood firm. Until then, he had also been receiving the produce of the field. After twelve years of legal struggle, Ramkisun received a decree from the court in his favour. After winning the first case of his life concerning property, concerning land, Ramkisun's influence increased among the young men, and it also made its mark upon the litigants of the area.

Yet people were not as affected by Ramkisun's decree over the land as they were by the rise of Ramkisun's influence in society. All kinds of people, of all

levels, exist in society, and Kamalpur was no different. There are people in village society who plant thorny shrubs on the road for no reason at all. A newly formed group rose against Ramkisun, a group that took upon itself everything from court-pairavi to the expenses of the case. Everyone knows how courts work: to correct a single letter in a person's name may take thirty or forty years; here the question concerned land, so it could easily take fifty or sixty years. The aim was to inflict economic loss upon Ramkisun and to affect his field of work as well. Lakhan Jha carried the decision of the lower court to the higher court.

Along with Mangaldev, Ramkisun's influence received the force of a new power. The same Ramkisun who had never seen the face of a court or kachahri had now thrown aside, face up and face down, many seasoned courtly champions. Young men of the newly sprouting Communist thought in Kamalpur society began to stand up one after another with their own problems.

Society, after all, is forest-like. By forest-like, one means that the society which has existed until now has been born, has flowered and fruited, through thousands of years of bondage. Because of this, thousands of different-coloured problems have held society in fragmentation. Even within that, the problems exist in such tangled clusters that separating them is difficult. On one side, between caste and caste, and even within caste and caste, such distances have remained that, though people belong to the same caste, there is neither marriage exchange between them nor eating and drinking in one line. In between there is another matter too: Kamalpur is such a village where, within one caste itself, several lineages and sub-lineages have created a

distance almost as great as that between two different castes.

Despite thousands of problems in society, this much consciousness had certainly awakened among the young men of Kamalpur: just as caste division exists in many forms, sectarian division too exists. They understood all this. Therefore, why not grasp the foundation of both and bring the human being to the boundary of humanity itself? The essential problems of life, the problems whose solution would allow life to move forward in the right direction, unless those were seized and rooted out, society would not attain welfare.

Under the leadership of Mangaldev and Ramkisun, hundreds of young men of Kamalpur society had already joined one stream of thought. On top of that, the decree in Ramkisun’s case had made their minds and ideas stronger. Their fearlessness too increased. Within a year or a year and a half, dozens of cases rose and stood in society. Once the cases arose, the young men began to experience everything from pairavi in courts and kachahris to jail.

Just as the opponents of Communist thought continued to oppose it, so too the people of Communist thought continued to move forward in newer and newer forms. With time, change began to enter life. Feudal thought and feudal life began, little by little, to break and fall apart; and in those very places, a new society also arose. Of course, for the old order to collapse completely is difficult, for social ideology is not a scientific reaction that can turn a king into a pauper and a pauper into a king overnight. Social ideology moves along with one generation after another. True, when the pattern of life

changes, speed does come; but for that, favourable circumstances are also necessary. ❑

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Twenty-five years earlier, a disease had appeared in Ramkisun's body. It was a strange kind of disease. In the twelve months of the year, it remained strong for six months and weak for six months. In the winter months, from about the middle of **Agahan** to the middle of **Phagun**, the disease would grow strong; in the three months of summer it would remain weak. Just as it took a month and a half to rise, so too it took a month and a half to come down. That is to say, from **Katik** onward, for a month and a half, the disease would climb; and from the middle of Phagun, for a month and a half, it would begin to decline. The disease was nothing else: a whiteness would seize the body. The same body that flushed red in the summer months would, in winter, turn utterly white, like the body of a man suffering from pallor. It seemed as though all the blood in his body had dried up.

In the first two or three years, at the beginning of the disease, Ramkisun did not do much. But afterwards he began consulting doctors and taking medicines. Yet the disease remained as it was. Through the effect of the disease itself, Ramkisun ceased to regard it as a disease. He coloured his life so deeply in the colour of work that his mind moved away from the body and attached itself to

thought. Because of this, work did not remain merely work for him; it became life. Once absorbed in that life, he neither felt the fatigue of the body nor allowed the disease to press down upon his mind.

Twenty-five years earlier, medical science was not in the form in which it exists today. In rural areas it was even less so. There were practitioners of allopathy, and there were homoeopathic doctors too. Ordinary educated young men practised medicine, though they did not possess the kind of knowledge of medical science that people really needed. Allopathic and homoeopathic treatment were going on, and alongside them the Ayurvedic practical wisdom spread through society also continued. By Ayurvedic wisdom one means such things as making a decoction for a cold by mixing salt and pepper with leaves such as **tulsi** and **singhar**, according to the nature of the cold; or crushing **gandhaki** leaves and applying their juice to cuts and sores. There were hundreds of such remedies in use within society. Alongside all this, treatment through deities, village shrines, exorcism, and the **ojhas** and **gunis** who performed ritual healing also continued.

In rural areas, the few allopathic doctors who were connected with government hospitals, that is, who were in service, had their ability constrained in such a way that whatever disease a patient might have, almost the same kind of medicine was available to everyone at the hospital. The government's own condition was not good enough to provide treatment for the diseases and ailments spread across society. What remained, then, was that people's faith in the government should somehow be preserved: that there was a government hospital in the area, and that treatment for illness existed. Only two or three kinds

of medicines were kept in the hospital. Of course, private practice was carried on by doctors and by employees connected with the hospital too.

In the beginning, when the disease first attacked him, Ramkisun too had his illness treated in the same way as others did. Sometimes he took allopathic tablets, sometimes homoeopathic pills. Sometimes he drank some Ayurvedic juice, and sometimes he let an ojha or guni place hands upon his head in ritual treatment. Like those people who make disease a companion and walk with it, that is, who continue treating the disease while also continuing to live their lives, Ramkisun too took medicine for six months of the year and did without it for the other six months. Within himself, he never accepted or declared that he was a patient suffering from disease.

A patient often shapes his life in such a way that a mere headache turns into something like a boil on the head. Some diseases are such that, like a little swelling, boil or eruption, they settle after being rubbed two or four times by hand. But there are others in which five or ten persons may climb upon the body, or keep massaging it with oil, and yet the disease will continue to show its own power. Whatever exists, wherever it exists, let it remain there. What concern had Ramkisun with that? His concern was only this: he would not allow disease to snatch away his work, his life, from his hand. He would not regard himself as afflicted by disease and let his work be obstructed. If the disease had entered the body, let it remain there; he would resist it, continue taking his own medicines, and along with that carry forward his daily, occasional, desired and expiatory duties of life.

Disease too is disease. Does it have only one

manner, one movement, one form, one colour? There are patients, people afflicted with disease, who remain perfectly healthy in eating and drinking, in clothing and living, in playing and moving about, but become ill at the time of work. This should not be taken to mean that I am speaking of the the so-called royal disease of comfort: eating fine food, living in comfort, enjoying good sport and pleasure, and still calling oneself ill.

After taking the borewell and pump-set in 1974, Ramkisun wanted to establish his life in a modern form, in a new form. Whenever he found time, day or night, he would turn work itself like a tulsi rosary in his hands. Here a doubt may arise: since a farmer’s life is tied to fields and open lands, how can anything be done in the middle of the night? But a farmer’s life is such that, let alone, not merely, day and night, even in sleep he joins the threads of his fields and farming. That very thread becomes **mantra-yoga**, then through **laya-yoga** reaches the boundary of **raja-yoga**. I am not speaking here of **hatha-yoga**, in whose eight limbs, after the first five, there is a gap, and only after that come the remaining three practices.

Such an awareness had risen in Ramkisun that, just as he had begun producing crops through a new method, so too he saw that within society, within the society of even one village and among the societies of other villages, agricultural production had its own methods that had continued in practical form. Therefore, just as Ramkisun kept his eye on agricultural farms and institutions and gathered new information, so too, among the people of his own village and among farmers of other villages, he raised discussions of production and collected knowledge about farming.

He gathered information from the radio station about agricultural measures: the measurement of fields in hectares, acres and metres, and weights in tonnes, quintals and kilograms. Alongside that, he also collected the village's traditional measures: **bigha, katha, dhur, kanma, kanai and paua, aseri, seer, paseri, dhara, maund and bora.** Until the very end of his life, he would still measure fields by steps, scatter seeds by hand, and then measure those seeds handful by handful and weigh them. Whatever Ramkisun did, he did; how much others were concerned with it, or not concerned with it, is a matter of person to person.

In speech, even the highest persons in power, if they come from a farming family, gladly wrap themselves in the honour and dignity of agrarian life and say, "I too am a farmer's son, and I too was brought up in a farming family." This should not be understood to mean that today's farmer's life and family conduct are of any one simple kind. What is the condition today of the farmers of the society into which one was born and in which one was brought up?

Agrarian life belongs neither to one country nor to one region alone; it is the life of all countries and all regions of the world. The life of the people in our own region, the Mithila region, has from the beginning been agrarian, and it remains so even now. Neither factories arrived in proper measure, nor did any other major change enter the life of society. In the form of industry, handloom practices did exist to some extent, but they remained within a limited direction. For instance, making oil from oilseeds had long been the occupation of particular castes. Similarly, making cloth from cotton remained the occupation of particular castes. There were

many other kinds of occupations which continued in society, but they remained tied to the hands of particular castes.

This was not limited to such industries and trades alone. It existed in agricultural production too, in farming as well. Betel cultivation, for instance, is regarded as the cultivation of a particular caste, and in practice it is done by them. Vegetable cultivation too is regarded as belonging to particular castes. Flower cultivation is similarly regarded as the work of the Mali caste. There is much more, but that is enough for now. The point is this: if, on this very foundation, these occupations had been adopted collectively, socially, or had been socialised, the social atmosphere up to the present would certainly have been of another kind.

When we look at the map of the world, we see that Japan is less than one-tenth of our country, India, both in land area and in population. Yet how far it has advanced, and where we remain stuck, is something we ourselves must see. In our own country too, across the entire land of India, neither the soil is of one kind, nor the water of one kind, nor the geographical formation of one kind. Therefore, the farmers of the whole country cannot have one identical life-pattern. In one region, land remains submerged in water year after year; in another, people cry out in distress for want of water. The weather formed between day and night also differs. In one region people pass life burning in heat, while in another they live through many different seasons in the year.

Whatever that may be, it belongs to the country as a whole. What need had Ramkisun of that? Yet he certainly believed this much: the goods that come from factories

we cannot supply, because we have neither the factories nor the raw materials. But food is the basic problem of life, and that can be supplied through agriculture. Of course, many agricultural products also become factory goods.

Ramkisun and Mangaldev moved beyond their own families and looked closely, deeply, at the economic resources of society and social life. They saw that the economic resource of the village was its fertile land, and that if the traditional method of cultivating it was taken a little forward, if even a little newness, a little modernity, was brought into it, then production in society would increase many times over. Once the yield of the fields increased, the maintenance of life would naturally become easier.

Until then, that is, until 1974-75, had this not been the history of the village: that no village's production had been sufficient to fulfil the needs of its own society? If it had been so, then among the families of the village there would not have been so many households in which the hearth did not burn properly twice a day. A hungry stomach and a burnt mind can think only this: this life has come not because of a failure in one's duty, but because of some fault of fate and destiny.

The clever groups of society had pushed karma, work, so far down that the masses did not give importance to labour; they gave importance to dependence upon fate and built a social atmosphere around it. How can this be said? It lives in the throats of people everywhere: if work and labour really produced results, then members of the Musahar community would have prospered, for they swing the spade day and night.

Yes, it is certainly true that work not done in the proper way is like pouring ghee into dung; but does that mean the importance of work itself comes to an end? How proper is such a conclusion?

When both of them, Ramkisun and Mangaldev, kept the village society before them and reflected on how to move it in the forward direction, dozens of glimmers of possible roads began to rise in their minds. The moment a cluster of light for future life rose in Ramkisun's mind, he said:

"Mangal Bhai, what would be good to do for the future?"

By then, many questions had already arisen in society. For when people come to know of a medicine, along with it there also rises the form of the disease and the influence of the atmosphere upon it. Thus in Kamalpur too, among the many-coloured castes and many-coloured lives of society, several questions were rising in people's minds. Their rising was proper. Suppose one has to reach some sacred place of life; then surely the question will arise: what is the distance between that place, that sacred place, and the place of the people? Yes, it is also true that the distance is small for some and great for others. But that does not mean the distance is the same for all. There are many kinds of distance. Once there is distance between one person and another, difficult places of division will also exist within that distance. Are not those difficult embankments and roads the very bonds of society, binding it like Brahma's snare?

Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, society is bound among thousands of problems. Everyone has his own problem, and there are

collective problems too, social problems. To list all these problems at once and make them active is a heavy task. But if we do not even raise them, how will society move with time?"

Mangaldev did not open up any particular problem and speak of it directly; but it would not be true to say that, by hint, he left any problem aside either. Like a half-ripe mango, Ramkisun understood some of the thought and did not understand some of it. In what he did understand, he saw, like Ravana's lineage, many branches and descendants. But some problems did not come into his sight at all. Had they come, he would surely have thought that, just as King Sagar's sixty thousand sons were burnt to ashes at once, something similar might happen here. Whatever may have happened, what concern had Ramkisun or Mangaldev with that? Their concern was only this: in the society into which a son is born, at that moment a flood of happiness enters house after house; at least this much certainly happens, that society feels a Bhishma-like son has arrived.

Putting a pause to his thought, Ramkisun said:

"Bhai, in the present circumstances, how can thought be set in motion?"

Hearing Ramkisun's question, Mangaldev's mind began to search restlessly. It searched because there were thousands of problems in society. If they themselves took hold of some and put them into action, and society took hold of some, then a solution was possible. Therefore, everyone would have to raise his face with his own problem. But to say that such problems should not even be thought about would not be right either.

Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, it is not true that everything we decide or think will certainly happen. But it is also not true that nothing will happen. Things do happen; they certainly will happen."

Ramkisun asked:

"Then?"

Mangaldev said:

"We are farmers. How farmers will progress, this is the only thought we have to take up now."

Hearing Mangaldev's thought, Ramkisun's mind paused. Within himself, however, he reflected that, among all those with whom they sat together, ate and drank together, and thought and spoke for society, it would surely be proper to think at least about them. Yet immediately his own mind told him that when the embankment or spill of the Kosi or the Kamala breaks, or when there is too much rain, floodwater enters the village. From courtyard and house to homestead bushes, fields and open lands, from children to adults, everyone bathes in the flood. But there is, after all, a difference between a river flood and a rain flood: one is like a flowing bath, the other like bathing in a pond. This should not be taken to mean that the Kamala has an embankment or a spill-channel; if it is a spill-channel, then if there is no confusion and disorder among those who manage it, how proper would that be?

In his own thought, Ramkisun's mind became so entangled that he seemed almost exhausted. Suddenly he thought: in the relationship he had had with Mangal Bhai until now, where had he ever seen any cutting or scratching of life? Then, if he did not walk according to Mangal Bhai's thought, would he not reach the same

place where, because people in society remain separated from one another, they neither become sharers in one another’s joys and sorrows nor remain true to those who are their sharers? This, after all, is society; it has to be seen, and it has also to be shown.

Ramkisun said:

“Bhai, whatever else you may be, you have certainly become like a guru, one who gives direction and vision. We sit together every day and talk. Then why should we not go on thinking about society in terms of today’s time and today’s surroundings?”

Hearing Ramkisun’s thought, Mangaldev’s mind filled like water deep in the underworld. Becoming composed, he said:

“Ramkisun, is the world a matter of laughter and jest, that we may take one hope, sit on the swing of Vrindavan, and sing the barahmasa? The hope of Krishna’s swing in Vrindavan will arise only when, by becoming Krishna, we attain Krishna, that is, see Krishna.”

Hearing Mangaldev’s thought, Ramkisun felt both satisfaction and thirst in his mind. He said:

“Bhai, just as Tulsibaba in the Ramayan sang, ‘Hari is endless, and endless are the tales of Hari,’ and in one stroke told the story of seven billion human beings, so you too have sung the tale of Vrindavan, of society as a grove.”

Seeing the deep emotional stir in Ramkisun’s heart, Mangaldev warned his own mind that to retreat from a wax-like life with a wax-like thought would be cowardice. He said:

“Ramkisun, for now we have to think only this much:

how agricultural production can be increased, so that loans from other countries may stop and the hearths of our own society may burn both evenings. And the second thought is this: the handloom industry that once existed in the village but has now left the village and disappeared, how, according to the needs of the present time, can it stand up again as a self-driven machine?”

When a question arises, it is better to understand the question properly. So Ramkisun began turning the thought over within himself like a pigeon swallowing grain. Looking at the set of Ramkisun’s face, Mangaldev understood that perhaps some grit or pebble had lodged in the pigeon’s beak and was stopping the swallowing. But that could be understood only when it came out of Ramkisun’s mouth.

The first question, the thought of improving agricultural production, Ramkisun understood well. But how the handloom could become a self-driven machine and run in the village, that he could not understand. In trying to understand it, his mind became confused, and his thought too became tangled. The colour of his face changed. Because the depth of his mind was disturbed, he could not grasp that just as heavy machines make the solution of heavy problems easier, so small machines too can remove the weight of unemployment. Seeing Ramkisun’s speech stop, Mangaldev said:

“Ramkisun, you are not making some thought of yours clear, are you?”

Caught in uncertainty, Ramkisun replied:

“Mangal Bhai, half of the thought I have understood more than half, but the other half I have understood less than half. That is why nothing is coming clearly to my

mind.”

When any thought or work has to be understood from below to above, from the lower condition up to the higher, and from the higher back down to the lower, the middle condition must be grasped clearly. Perhaps Ramkisun was not able to grasp that, and so both his mind and his thought had become clouded. Mangaldev said:

“What did you understand more than half, and what did you understand less than half? After all, two questions stand together.”

Ramkisun said:

“Mangal Bhai, I have understood a little why improvement in farming is needed. If there is no grain in the house, no food, then let alone, not merely, human beings, even dogs, cats, mice and shrews cry in hunger. So I have understood the matter of agricultural production. But I am not able to understand the thought of machines.”

Hearing Ramkisun’s words, Mangaldev’s mind felt both joy and astonishment. He felt joy because Ramkisun had spoken with the quality of a person without pretence: one who speaks the thought of his mind without any attachment or concealment, and through that gives his full introduction. He did not keep even the slightest covering within himself, unlike many people in society who, without understanding a work or a thought, will speak so forcefully in its favour that they appear to be fully experienced in both the work and the conduct of that thought.

At the same time, astonishment rose in Mangaldev’s mind because Ramkisun was not a man of no account. He

was an educated man, a matriculate, and a worker who was leading thought within society. But then Mangaldev's own mind told him that if Ramkisun had not understood so far, what did it matter? Until now, there had been no responsible leader to explain it. Considering the needs of the future, it would be useful both for society and for Ramkisun himself if he understood properly now.

When Mangaldev turned his gaze backwards, towards the world, his mind found, among the nearly one hundred and seventy-five countries of the world, three countries through which the matter could be explained well. Only when people begin to see and think with their own understanding does life take a step in the direction of progress.

Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, there are many kinds of countries in the world. It is neither necessary to understand all of them, nor necessary to put all our means, our entire strength, behind them. A person who walks looking at the clouds, looking upward, is bound to stumble over pits, bricks and stones fixed in the ground, and there is always the fear of falling into a hole. Therefore, for now, we need to think only this much."

Hearing from Mangaldev's mouth that there were three countries, Ramkisun's mind filled with curiosity like a thirsty **papiha**. When some new knowledge is received, the newness of thought that rises in the mind brings new forms of the world, the visible world, before the eyes. Something similar happened to Ramkisun. He said:

"Yes, yes, Bhai Sahib. There is no reason for farmers to start growing every kind of grain, vegetable and fruit that exists in the world. If they do that, they will go mad.

Everything has its own time, its own season, and its own soil and water; these are not available everywhere in the same way. So it will be better if you gather the outlines of only those three countries and explain them properly. That will be useful for us."

Hearing Ramkisun's thought, a quietness, almost a saintly calm, arose in Mangaldev's mind. With the impartiality of a saint, he said:

"Ramkisun, Japan, England, that is, Britain, and Nepal are all small countries, and their populations too are not very large. Yet each of the three has its own qualities. By knowing them, one can gain a great deal of understanding about many countries of the world. Therefore it will be more useful to speak of these three."

Ramkisun's mind was still wandering where it had heard the names of nearly one hundred and seventy-five countries. Yet, hearing that discussion of the three would be more useful, he expressed agreement and said:

"Nepal is, after all, a country close to us. It did not remain under an outside ruler, but it certainly remained under such an internal rule as a country might experience under an outside ruler."

A curiosity stirred in Ramkisun's mind to understand the difference between outside rule and internal rule. But because the matter would move away from the subject, he held back that thought and said:

"Mangal Bhai, leave aside the matter of rule. Tell me only this much: what is the condition of human life in those three countries?"

Hearing Ramkisun's thought, Mangaldev's own mind agreed that human life itself gives the complete introduction of a country. Therefore it would be best to

speak only of the economic sources of the three countries; that would be the right thought of the right earth. Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, first learn the economic foundation of the three countries and plant it in your mind. Afterwards we shall speak of the qualities and defects of each."

Ramkisun asked:

"What is the foundation of those three?"

Mangaldev said:

"Nepal is, in the full sense, an agriculture-based country. Of course, Nepal has two forms: the Terai region and the hill region. From the Terai up to the hills, people live on land-based production. In the name of industry, there are only a few agriculture-based sugar mills and mills for rice, pulses and oil."

Ramkisun interrupted:

"Is that all?"

Mangaldev said:

"Yes. The second country is England, Britain, where agriculture is negligible and factories are the main basis of life. And the third is Japan, where there is advanced agriculture as well."

Unexpectedly, the words came out of Ramkisun's mouth:

"Then Japan is the best of all."

Mangaldev asked:

"How have you accepted that?"

Ramkisun said:

"Is not food the main basis of human life? If that remains in our own hands, then we can produce

according to our own will and also eat in a balanced way. Recently I heard that in Japan there is a variety of mango which is the most beautiful and also the most expensive in the world. Its name is Miyazaki, and it grows in Japan as well as in the Philippines.”

Hearing of the most beautiful mango, Ramkisun remembered the mangoes of his own place, of his own country. There were such mangoes in Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh too. But the work for which he had come out of the house began to stir in his mind. To waste time in conversation would be to play with life. Knowledge of the world certainly has its own importance in life; but if he now began gathering that knowledge, then his present life, the work of today, would fall behind. Once the work of the present falls behind, life too slips away from time. To hold time, to make life move with time, is that not the proper way of living? A turn came in Ramkisun’s thought, and as soon as that turn came, he said:

“Mangal Bhai, just as we cannot know ourselves properly without knowing the world, so too we cannot know the world properly without knowing ourselves. But this time we can see how rain has begun before its time. Other lives based on other kinds of work may not be affected so much by it, but for farming life it is certainly a blow of the axe. If in such a time we do not remain alert and aware, life will surely suffer. Therefore, let us stop the discussion for now. I have sown seed in the field and it has gone under water. I have to draw out that water and throw it away. So let me go now.”

Mangaldev’s thought had, in fact, become fully prepared. He wanted to explain properly to Ramkisun what small industry was, what possibilities existed in their

own region, and how far the condition of the country could improve and move forward through it. But seeing Ramkisun's urgency for work, he thought that when one is receiving knowledge of one subject and another subject grips the mind, then understanding the first subject properly is certainly obstructed. Bringing his own thought into balance within his mind, Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, seeing the importance of your work, my mind too has agreed completely. Let us pause the discussion and move towards work. But the subject, the knowledge of those three countries, has its own current, and knowing that too has importance. Therefore, bear with the time a little, and I too shall shorten my thought and tell you one thing."

Hearing Mangaldev's view, Ramkisun thought that since this knowledge was not in his own possession, he himself was perhaps not measuring its importance properly, and therefore it appeared unimportant to him. But Mangal Bhai was perhaps touching the very depth, the central current of the subject; that was why he was laying such stress upon it. It would be better to delay his work a little and first understand Mangaldev's thought. That would be useful for life. Ramkisun said:

"Mangal Bhai, in the market, when there is little money in the pocket and the eyes fall upon many useful things, the mind tries to balance what should be bought and what would be best. So, between the two of us...?"

Hearing Ramkisun's helpless thought, Mangaldev shaped and smoothed his own thought, just as a bamboo article is pared and polished to make it useful, and said:

"Ramkisun, the village in which we live is far more beautiful than a village in Japan, from the geographical

point of view. But where the question of life stands, the question of human life, there we are so much worse than Japanese life that when we place the two lives before us and look at them, our own mind will certainly reproach itself."

Hearing Mangaldev's thought, Ramkisun's own thought seemed to leap up. He said:

"Mangal Bhai, then please compare the two a little carefully."

Hearing Ramkisun's words, Mangaldev understood that mantra-yoga itself creates the strength to reach laya-yoga. Perhaps the same had happened to Ramkisun too. Therefore, he should place clearly before him the possibilities of small industry in their own region. Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, the kind of soil, water and climate we have here is found nowhere else in the world, in no country. Therefore the produce of the fields here is limitless."

Ramkisun could not understand Mangaldev's thought properly, but he certainly wanted to understand it. He said:

"Mangal Bhai, please say it a little steadily, so that whatever is in your mind may enter mine properly."

Hearing Ramkisun's thought, Mangaldev's own mind grew restless. The reason for this restlessness was that many questions had come before him at once. Just as there was the comparison of soil and water here, so too there was the full geographical condition of India and Japan to be understood; and along with this, most important of all, there was the distance between the human strength of our people and that of Japan. Within

himself, Mangaldev thought: why not first catch hold of Ramkisun's immediate time and bind it? Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, this is a matter of two countries, and therefore there are many things in it. You also have to go and drain water from the seed-bed. So you yourself say what you wish to understand."

Just as a very hungry man, on receiving only a little food, feels both satisfied and unsatisfied, so it happened with Ramkisun too. On one side, the unsatisfied hunger of his mind pulled him; on the other, the satisfied hunger of life, of the body, also pulled him. Bringing the two into balance, Ramkisun said:

"Mangal Bhai, neither are you running away anywhere, nor am I running away anywhere. I shall understand the matter of Japan properly later. For now, we can see how our time has been disturbed. If we do not shape life according to that, how shall we live? Therefore it will be better to understand it clearly later. For now, explain only this much: what possibilities lie before us for the future?"

Hearing Ramkisun's words, Mangaldev's mind too felt that Ramkisun wished to understand a good thought. But the seriousness with which it needed to be understood could not be conveyed properly in this haste. Even so, if he could push the thought, even roughly, towards the subject of future possibilities, would Ramkisun's own mind not begin digging it out for itself? Meanwhile, why should he not, like an honest thinker, worship the subject honestly for the moment and gather his own senses? Mangaldev said:

"Ramkisun, there are two questions together. Therefore, I shall give a brief introduction to one and

acquaint you properly with the other.”

Giving his agreement, Ramkisun said:

“Bhai Sahib, no subject is ever understood fully according only to the listener’s mind or only to the speaker’s mind. It is understood according to the subject itself. Therefore, harmony between the two is necessary. Looking at the time, explain it briefly now; later, when time is available, explain it further.”

Mangaldev said:

“Ramkisun, just as human life is filled to the brim with possibilities, and whoever honestly holds to his aim and resolves himself to action can attain what he seeks, so too the village and society are full of possibilities. Therefore it is necessary...”

Mangaldev had not yet brought his thought to a full stop when Ramkisun spoke in the middle:

“What possibility is there in human life, Bhai Sahib?”

Mangaldev said:

“Ramkisun, because of your own work you do not wish to listen, and yet...”

Ramkisun said:

“Tell me in brief.”

Mangaldev said:

“Just as there are abundant possibilities before human beings, and whatever they wish to achieve according to the needs of time they may attain, so our own village and other villages too have limitless possibilities. The work of the farmer’s life, which has until now been done by hand, can be pushed towards such self-moving machines as the people of Japan have pushed themselves towards. Because of that, their production,

both through machines and through fields, has advanced so far that they astonish the world."

Hearing Mangaldev's thought, Ramkisun asked:

"What should we do now?"

Smiling, Mangaldev said:

"Do nothing. Hold life, establish it in life, in the soil, and raise your steps while looking ahead. Wherever we stand, or bend, or sit, or have fallen, from that very place we must make the basis of life, rise, stand up from now itself, and try to run."

Ramkisun said:

"I am going now."

After taking leave of Mangaldev, a storm seemed to rise within Ramkisun's mind in relation to life. Many resolves and counter-resolves began to stir in him. But however deeply one may swim in the sea, one still needs life. Among the seven billion people in the world, he too was one. Just as everyone needs life, so did he. Therefore one should become so lost in life that the pain of birth, the suffering at the time of being born, and the pain of death, the suffering at the moment when life departs, are both forgotten, and one continues swimming somewhere in the current of a life of action.

With his resolve, Ramkisun took hold of his life in his own hands, closed his fist around it, and leapt into the current of life. As time moved forward, Ramkisun too stood in the village as a year-round farmer.

Ramkisun was connected with society, and therefore he began to remain with society in its joys and sorrows. In the thought of Kamalpur society, a surge like floodwater had already begun. As many lives as there were, as many

human beings as there were, so many nets of problems had spread; and everyone was hurting from his own pain. A net is, after all, a net. Knots and tangles form in every strand of it; it is not easy to open them. Yet the one trapped in the net has to come out. To break the net spread through society is not easy; nor is it easy to open it and then weave it again. In a society whose life has been breaking and falling for thousands of years, reform cannot be brought by sitting with folded hands. In dozens of cases, Ramkisun stood as a defendant among defendants. Taking his resolve, his thought and his labour as his guides, Ramkisun leapt into the current of life.

In terms of labour, Ramkisun did not progress in the economic field as much as he should have. But in the field of thought, he certainly made such progress that he continued to place his ideas before society and move forward. Even so, his economic condition remained weak. The reason he could not progress economically was the expense of lawsuits and the obstruction caused to his own work by his involvement in social work.

In the morning, before sunrise, as Ramkisun did every day, he inspected all his fields and fixed his work for the day. Today too he looked over his fields. What he saw was a small plot of fifteen dhurs, a four-month field. Looking at that field, Ramkisun thought to himself that after tea and breakfast he would come back and turn it over with the hoe, that is, dig it up. At present there was still a little too much moisture, so after one day of sun the field would come into proper condition. Once the field reached that state, he would break its clods, turn it over again, level it, and then take the next step.

After digging that very field, Ramkisun returned

from the fields at eleven o'clock, bathed, and went to eat. Seeing the served jackfruit bulbs, fragrant and richly scented, he ate a little more than usual. There were two reasons for eating more: on one side, the attraction of good food; on the other, the three hours of back-breaking labour he had already done.

That very jackfruit swelled in Ramkisun's stomach and produced so much gas that it emptied his power of consciousness.

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Glossary

Agahan – A month in the traditional Indian calendar, roughly corresponding to November–December.

Anchal – A local revenue or administrative area below the district level.

Aantar – A local unit or section used in betel-leaf cultivation.

Ashadh – A month in the traditional Indian calendar, roughly corresponding to June–July.

Asin – A month in the traditional Indian calendar, roughly corresponding to September–October.

Aseri – A traditional local unit of weight or measure.

Bareb – An enclosed and shaded structure or plot prepared for betel-leaf cultivation.

Barahmasa – A traditional poetic or folk form based on the twelve months of the year.

Baua – An affectionate form of address for a boy, young man or son-like person.

Bhadon – A month in the traditional Indian calendar, roughly corresponding to August–September.

Bhai – Brother; also used as an affectionate or respectful form of address.

Bhaiya – Elder brother; also used as a respectful form of address for an older male.

Bhandara – A communal religious feast, usually organised at a temple or sacred place.

Bhauji – Sister-in-law; usually the wife of an elder brother.

Bigha – A traditional unit of land measurement, varying from region to region.

Bora – A sack or bag, often used for grain or other agricultural produce.

Brahminical ritualism – Ritual practices associated with Brahminical authority, especially when viewed critically as rigid or exploitative.

Chulha – A traditional earthen or brick hearth used for cooking.

Darbajja – The front sitting-space or entrance area of a traditional house in Mithila.

Dhara – A local measure or quantity term used in rural transactions.

Dharamshala – A public rest-house or shelter, often built for travellers, pilgrims or guests.

Dhatura – A wild poisonous plant, also known in traditional medicinal and ritual contexts.

Dheki – A traditional wooden device used for husking or pounding grain.

Dholi – A local counting or quantity unit used especially in relation to betel leaves.

Dhur – A small traditional unit of land measurement.

Dom community – A caste community traditionally associated, in this context, with making bamboo articles.

Durga Puja – A major Hindu festival dedicated to Goddess Durga.

Gamchha – A thin traditional cotton cloth used as a towel, shoulder cloth or head covering.

Gandhaki – A local medicinal plant used in folk remedies.

Gita – The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu scripture forming part of the Mahabharata.

Guni – A folk healer or ritual specialist believed to possess healing or occult knowledge.

Harijan – An older local usage found in the text; it is not the preferred contemporary term.

Hatha-yoga – A branch of yoga associated with bodily discipline and specific physical practices.

Homa – A ritual fire-offering in Hindu religious practice.

Huller – A machine used for husking grain.

Japa – Repeated chanting or recitation of a sacred name or mantra.

Jarasiman – A local term connected with land transaction, possession or boundary-related rural practice.

Jatihar – A caste-based communal feast or social gathering.

Kachahri – An estate office or local administrative office, especially under the zamindari system.

Kachchi seer – A local or older form of the seer, a traditional unit of weight.

Kaka – Paternal uncle; also used as a respectful form of address for an older man.

Kalash – A sacred water-pot used in Hindu rituals.

Kamadhenu – The wish-fulfilling cow of Hindu mythology.

Kanai – A local unit of measure.

Kanma – A local unit of land or quantity measurement.

Kanthi – A sacred necklace or religious thread worn as a sign of initiation.

Kanyadaan – A Hindu marriage ritual in which the bride is ceremonially given away.

Katha – A traditional unit of land measurement smaller than a bigha.

Katik – A month in the traditional Indian calendar, roughly corresponding to October–November.

Koiris – A caste community traditionally associated with vegetable cultivation and agriculture.

Korba – A local structural or measurement term used in betel-leaf cultivation.

Kos – A traditional unit of distance.

Kujras – A caste community traditionally associated with cultivation or produce-related work.

Laya-yoga – A form of yoga associated with absorption or dissolution of the mind.

Loit – A special earthen water-vessel used for irrigating betel plants.

Lota – A small rounded metal vessel used for carrying or pouring water.

Lungi – A traditional lower garment worn around the waist.

Mahajan – A village moneylender or creditor.

Mahant – A religious head, guru or custodian of a temple or sect.

Malguzari – Land revenue or revenue collection under the old landholding system.

Mandap – A ceremonial pavilion, especially used in Hindu marriage rituals.

Mantra-yoga – A form of yoga or spiritual discipline based on mantra recitation.

Mas-malik – A local term for a landholder or revenue-connected owner with interests beyond his own village.

Maund – A traditional unit of weight.

Mukhiya – The elected head of a village panchayat.

Musahar community – A marginalised caste community traditionally associated with landless labour.

Ojha – A ritual healer or exorcist in folk tradition.

Panchaiti – Local mediation or settlement of disputes through village elders or community representatives.

Panchayat – A village-level local self-government body.

Panches – Members or elders who sit in judgement or mediation in a panchaiti.

Panth – A religious sect or spiritual path.

Papiha – A bird often used in Indian poetry as a symbol of thirst, longing or intense desire.

Parichhan – A local marriage ritual of ceremonial welcome, often performed when the groom arrives.

Paseri – A traditional unit of weight.

Paua – A small traditional unit of measure.

Pahun – Guest; in Mithila usage, often used for a son-in-law or a respected guest.

Phagun – A month in the traditional Indian calendar, roughly corresponding to February–March.

Pramukh – An elected head at the block level.

Prasad – Food offered to a deity and then distributed among

devotees.

Puja – Worship or ritual offering to a deity.

Ram Lila – A dramatic performance based on the life of Lord Rama.

Ram Navami – A Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Lord Rama.

Ramaut panth – A local religious sect or devotional tradition associated with Rama worship.

Raja-yoga – A form of yoga associated with mental discipline and spiritual realisation.

Samdhi – A relationship between the fathers or close elders of a married couple; an in-law relation formed through marriage.

Sabha – An assembly or organised social or caste gathering.

Sabhaiti – A caste-assembly-related feast or social relation.

Seer – A traditional unit of weight.

Sharecropper – A cultivator who farms another person's

land and gives a share of the produce to the landowner.

Shraddha-karma – Post-death Hindu rituals performed for the departed.

Sikmi – A local land-tenure term associated with subordinate or tenancy rights.

Singhar – A local medicinal leaf or plant used in folk remedies.

Sonara-64 – An improved variety of wheat.

Terai – The lowland region at the foothills of the Himalayas, especially in Nepal and northern India.

Thana – A police station or local police jurisdiction.

Tola – A hamlet or settlement cluster within a village.

Tori – An oilseed crop, related to mustard or rapeseed.

Tulsi – Sacred basil, a plant widely used in worship and traditional medicine.

V.L.W. – Village Level Worker, a rural field worker who provides agricultural information and support.

Yajna – A Vedic or Hindu ritual involving offerings, often into a sacred fire.

Zamindar – A landlord under the old land-revenue system.

Notes